MARGARET DASHWOOD
or
INTERFERENCE
by
Mrs. FRANCIS BROWN

London
John Lane The Bodley Head Limited

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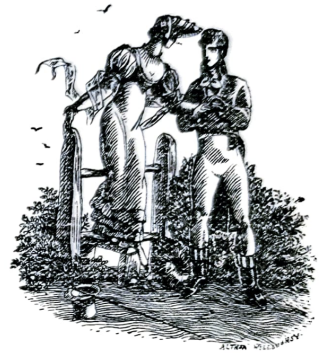

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CHAPTER I

MARGARET DASHWOOD was an observer of life. Her temper was calm, her manner gentle, and she was able to listen to the accounts other people gave of their activities without the appearance of fatigue. The circumstances of her life up to the age of seventeen had combined to increase in her these qualities, so valuable to her acquaintance, so agreeable to herself, and so baffling to those desiring a nearer intimacy. She was the youngest of three daughters, not so accomplished and self-reliant as Elinor, not so handsome and impulsive as Marianne, and less attractive than either, if to be immediately noticed is to be attractive.

Their mother was a widow, whose income, though possibly equal to her expenditure, was consistently below her wishes, and the three Miss Dashwoods were obliged to suit their requirements to their mother's purse rather than to her heart.

Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood had lived for ten years with his uncle, the owner of a large estate in Sussex to which Mr. Dashwood was the heir. The property was inherited, but enjoyed for only a twelvemonth, and Mrs. Dashwood became a widow with a small income.

The idea of wealth takes root quickly in the mind, and Mrs. Dashwood was not easily convinced that she was now unable to afford indulgences for her daughters. Her own tastes were simple, or became so after her change of situation; and, in order that Elinor and Marianne might be suitably attired and escorted, her own pin-money was severely taxed. Margaret, as the youngest daughter and not yet grown up, had a more personal experience of the family economies than her sisters, and she learned more of the meaning of the word "poor" than either of them was ever to know.

Six months after her husband's death Mrs. Dashwood removed, with her daughters, from Norland Park, in the county of Sussex, to Barton Cottage, near Exeter. Margaret was only thirteen at the time of this removal and, though deeply mourning the loss of her father, with whom she had been a

special favourite, her feelings on leaving her home were tinged quite as much with excitement as with regret. She had found, however, that, if she wished to be left in peace to her own reflections, it was wise to agree with outward fervour with Marianne, whose sensibilities were of such a nature as to brook no opposition, least of all from a younger sister.

In Marianne's company Margaret expressed undying sorrow at parting from the woods of Norland—but she ran away if her father's name occurred. With her mother she said little of regrets, but something of the joy of living in a cottage, and possibly keeping pigs and poultry; and with Elinor her subjects of conversation were still more limited for, as a rule, to her eldest sister she said nothing at all. She was quite willing to admire Elinor for her wisdom and elegance, but was not very fond of her society, and did not covet her notice, which usually took the form of gentle reproof or a slightly satirical approval. Margaret did not feel that she merited either. Most of her time was spent with Marianne, who would read aloud to her and rhapsodize with great spirit, if no older listener was to be secured. With her mother she was always happy, for Mrs. Dashwood restrained her grief when with her child, though she was in the habit of indulging it more freely with her elder daughters.

The new owner of Norland, John Dashwood, the son of Mr. Dashwood by a former wife, early took up his residence accompanied by his wife and little son, now the heir to the property. Margaret soon contrived to dismiss her brother and his wife from her thoughts as "very disagreeable." When obliged to be in company with them she merely thought of something else, and in this way escaped much that tried her mother and sisters almost beyond bearing. Her little nephew, Harry, she loved dearly, and amused him untiringly, and in this way gained approval and some degree of liking from Mrs. John Dashwood. Margaret was as unaware of this honour as she would have been indifferent had she known of it.

In one respect Elinor became the subject of special interest and reflection to Margaret during the months that followed their father's death and before their removal was decided. Mrs. John Dashwood's brother, Edward Ferrars,

had come to pay a short visit to his sister, and remained to pay a long one. Wherever Margaret went in the garden or shrubbery she found Edward and Elinor there before her, pacing the walks in earnest talk or sitting on a garden-seat while Elinor drew and Edward read aloud to her. It was Margaret's first experience of the kind, and she found it exceedingly interesting, so much so that on more than one occasion she felt inclined to call her mother's attention to it, but the habit of silence prevailed and, later, her thoughts were distracted by her mother's announcement of the pending removal.

The day came for their departure, and Marianne's tears flowed freely in the carriage as they drove away from Norland. Mrs. Dashwood did not restrain her grief, and even the self-contained Elinor was moved. Margaret, however, held her perfectly dry handkerchief up to her face and peeped over it at the countryside and villages. By and by she was able to put away the appearance of sorrow, and on the second day could enjoy the journey without pretense. Elinor was determinedly full of interest and admiration. Mrs. Dashwood responded quickly to this happier mood, and even Marianne brightened as the beauties of Devonshire came in sight. Barton Cottage itself was pronounced bearable, and its situation was found to be perfection.

Here Margaret was to live and grow up from thirteen to seventeen—when our story opens—and much was she to observe in those four years.

She was to see how lovers advance and retire, set to corners, and set to partners not only in the ballroom. She was to find from Sir John Middleton and his wife, their near neighbours, that kindness could be inconvenient and that children could be troublesome; from Colonel Brandon that a brother-in-law could be old enough to be her father; from Edward Ferrars that a brother-in-law could be sober enough to be her grandfather; from Mrs. Jennings, Lady Middleton's mother, that sweethearts were a good joke; from Miss Steele that beaux were vastly entertaining; and from her own sisters that lovers caused more grief and pain than she would have supposed possible.

CHAPTER II

ON an April day in 1813, Margaret Dashwood and her mother were driven up to the door of Barton Cottage. They left many interests behind them at Delaford. Elinor Ferrars at the parsonage, and Marianne Brandon at the mansion house, the husband of each, who seemed to Mrs. Dashwood as dear as her own sons would have been if she had had any, and two attractive grandchildren, one in each household, made up the number to six dear ones left behind. It would not have been unlike Mrs. Dashwood's warmhearted nature to have entered her own home in dejection of spirits; but this was not the case. She hurried in, full of interest and happiness, and Margaret followed with the book and purse left in the carriage.

"Has Mr. Atherton arrived?" Mrs. Dashwood asked the waiting maid, "Not yet." "That is well. Have you his room prepared? Miss Margaret and I have had some refreshment on the road. Tell Mrs. Thomas to keep back dinner till Mr. Atherton arrives. He will be here before three o'clock I am convinced."

Mrs. Dashwood greeted the other servants, who were assembled to meet her, with the sweetness of address to which they were accustomed, and joyfully turned to the parlour, whither Margaret had preceded her.

"What a lovely fire!'' she said. "And a wonderful basket of flowers from Sir John. What a kind neighbour he is! To-morrow, my love, you and I must walk up to the Park."

"And the next day Sir John and Mrs, Jennings will come to us," went on Margaret.

"And the day after Lady Middleton and little William," continued Mrs. Dashwood.

"And after that we go there again," finished Margaret.

" You do not intend any objection, my Margaret, surely? They are kind neighbours, and must be treated with attention."

Margaret replied that she felt no objection that she could urge. "On the

whole I prefer visiting them to receiving their calls. We have the pleasure of the walk, and can end the visit when we choose, and though doubtless we interrupt their occupations sadly, it is better than being interrupted ourselves."

Mrs. Dashwood had done less than justice to Sir John Middleton's neighbourliness of spirit. The flowers were no more than the herald of his goodwill. She was still re-arranging her dress in her bed-chamber when she saw from her window Sir John and Mrs. Jennings crossing the lawn, and heard them tapping on the window to announce their arrival to Margaret. Mrs. Dashwood entered the sitting-room in time to catch Sir John's inquiry as to how many beaux Miss Margaret had left disconsolate behind her at Delaford, and to hear Mrs. Jennings's hearty rejoinder on Margaret's behalf, ''Miss Margaret has only to waggle her little finger to have them all after her, but she will not take the trouble."

Margaret's composure remained undisturbed, and she turned a smiling face to each in turn without exerting herself to make any other reply.

Mrs. Dashwood's entrance stopped the flow of gallantry by diverting the attention of the two visitors to herself.

"And how is dear Mrs. Ferrars? And Mrs. Brandon too? As beautiful as ever, I will be bound, and the children will be old enough to fight each other now. My daughter Middleton is desirous of hearing all about them. She has an idea that Miss Marianne's boy—I should say Mrs. Brandon's—is taller than William was at his age and cannot rest till the matter is decided, and, for my part, I hope, ma'am, that my grandson has the advantage of yours, or we shall never hear the last of it from the child's mother. Is it not so, Sir John? Lady Middleton is determined to have her boy the taller."

"For my part, I do not care which has it, ma'am," replied Sir John, " but I hope William will be the better sportsman when they are both full grown, and that is all there is to say about it."

"You will find us all poor company after the party at Delaford, Miss Margaret," went on Mrs. Jennings. "There is not a young man within ten

miles, but we have one treat in store for you. Who do you think is coming to the Park this afternoon?"

Margaret was unable to make any conjecture.

"Well, then, what do you think of Miss Nancy Steele?"

Margaret's smile gave very little indication of her thoughts, which were briefly that the addition of Miss Steele to the party at Barton would neither lessen its dullness nor add to its happiness. One merit in the arrival she could perceive: Miss Steele's beaux would prove a subject of conversation more accessible than her own, as Miss Steele would herself gladly supply all the material required for Mrs. Jennings's and Sir John's wit, and would join with enthusiasm in the laughter raised.

Sir John's next care was to secure the promise of a speedy visit from the ladies, and was for urging them to return with Mrs. Jennings and himself at once to dine at the Park, and thus secure the earliest possible meeting with Miss Steele. To this Mrs. Dashwood would not consent, and pleaded fatigue and the necessity of seeing her household, in vain. Sir John would not give way unless confronted with some better excuse than what he surmised was mere disinclination. He pressed his point so urgently that Mrs. Dashwood thought it best to admit that it was not in their power to accept his invitation. They were expecting the arrival of Mr. Atherton that afternoon.

"Ha ha! Miss Margaret," ejaculated Mrs. Jennings, "I was sure there was some beau in the question. Don't tell me but that Mr. Atherton is young and handsome."

Sir John unwillingly admitted the prior claim of a visitor in the house, and bowed himself out, but with the assurance that he would wait on Mr. Atherton at the earliest possible opportunity on the morrow.

Mr. Atherton was a stranger to both households, if the term may rightly be used when letters have been exchanged. Both Mrs. Dashwood and Sir John had reached this stage of intimacy with the expected guest, as Mr. Atherton was the new vicar of Barton and had been presented to the living by Sir John, but owed his introduction to the neighbourhood to a member of the

Dashwood family.

Mrs. John Dashwood of Norland Park and Lady Middleton were in the habit of meeting yearly in London. There was a certain lack of heart, and excess of formality on both sides, which endeared them to each other, and so far as either was capable of friendship they were friends. Therefore when the living of Barton fell vacant it was not long before Lady Middleton had confided to Fanny Dashwood her hopes and fears in the matter. Sir John's judgment was not to be trusted, and the new incumbent might be far from presentable if the choice were left entirely to her husband's discretion.

"My dear Lady Middleton, there can be no occasion for you to see anything of the man," Mrs. Dashwood declared. '"My own brother, it is true, is in orders, but it is by no means the rule for the profession to be adopted by people of birth or consequence. Take my advice, and have very little to do with the parsonage. You would not like to see your darling William and Annamaria intimate with the parsonage children ? "

"It is different in your case, Mrs. Dashwood," replied her ladyship. "Sir John is so fond of society and entertainment that I am convinced he will have the new vicar constantly to the Park. Poor old Mr. Tillis was bed-ridden, so could not visit, but I am sure things will be different now, and consequently it is of the greatest importance that he should be of good appearance and gentlemanly bearing."

Mrs. John Dashwood sympathized with her friend on her husband's regrettable lavishness of hospitality, a fault of which her own spouse was altogether free, though she sometimes suspected him of over generosity in other directions. Nothing was too much for him to do, no trouble too much for him to undertake on behalf of his father's widow and her daughters.

"1 am telling Lady Middleton, my love," she went on as her husband entered the room, "how your father's death left the care of his second family on your shoulders. Two of them have, as you know, ma'am, made most creditable marriages, entirely due to their brother's untiring efforts on their behalf, and now there is poor little Margaret, by far the most

affectionate of the three, but we can hear of nothing for her."'

As Lady Middleton was tolerably well acquainted with the facts she might have been surprised by this account of the courtship and marriage of the two elder Miss Dashwoods, but the truth is that she heard none of it. Her attention had been caught by an annoying tear in her best India muslin and, when she had disengaged her thoughts from this disaster, they had flown back to the possible inconvenience of an unsuitable appointment to the living of Barton.

"Perhaps Mr. Dashwood could help us," she said, and related to him her perplexities and fears. He was all attention and sympathy. Such a danger must at all costs be averted, and he begged for a few moments' quiet while he considered the matter from every point of view.

This was readily agreed to, and ten minutes complete silence granted him. The time was pleasantly spent by the two ladies in discussing the merits of a fine darn as compared with a new breadth, Mrs. Dashwood arguing economy and Lady Middleton fearful that no darn could be finely enough executed to please her. Meanwhile, Mr. Dashwood paced the room with his hands behind him in anxious thought. When he reseated himself in his chair, and brought the points of his fingers together, his attitude and expression were those of quiet satisfaction.

"Your ladyship," he began, "I think I may congratulate myself on having solved your problem and our own at one and the same time. Two birds with one stone in fact, though I flatter myself that this idea of mine is more—or rather I should say less—in fact there is no killing in the question; quite the contrary. I happen to number among my acquaintance a certain Mr. Atherton, a very fine young man indeed—quite a presentable figure. He has moderate means, but wishes to improve his position, and considers taking Orders. The offer of the living of Barton should settle the matter. I am inclined to think that your ladyship and Sir John would find him acceptable. Other developments, my dear Fanny, we may hope will follow."

Lady Middleton neither knew nor cared what the other developments might be. Her carriage was announced at that moment, and she departed to

acquaint Sir John with Mr. Dashwood's suggestion.

Once more John Dashwood's generous plans seemed successful. To confer benefits at the expense of his acquaintance was ever before him, as his duty to society. Sir John seemed only too glad to be spared trouble and responsibility. Mr. Atherton was in due course made known to Lady Middleton; and, though Sir John could not spare time while in town to meet the young man himself, he was satisfied if Lady Middleton was pleased. He wrote a friendly letter offering the living. Mr. Atherton wrote a politely grateful one accepting it, and plans for the improvement of the vicarage were immediately put in hand. Improvements are seldom rapidly accomplished, and these took so long that Mr. Atherton had taken Orders, and was prepared to enter on his new duties before the house was ready for him.

Mr. John Dashwood, however, would not submit to a postponement of the happiness he proposed for his sister and her mother, and for Sir John and Lady Middleton, and for Mr. Atherton himself. He generously provided for the comfort of the latter by writing to implore his mother-in-law to despatch an invitation to the new vicar to enable him to begin his duties from Barton Cottage.

With unfailing courtesy and hospitality she readily agreed. The invitation was sent, and accepted, and Mr, Atherton was momentarily expected.

CHAPTER III

MRS. DASHWOOD'S attempt to exclude Mr. Atherton's name from her conversation with Sir John was not caused by any wish on her part to keep the intended visit a secret. She was well aware that nothing of the sort was possible, but she would have been better pleased if Sir John and Mrs. Jennings had accepted her first excuses. Though accustomed to their raillery on the subject of courtship she never became reconciled to it, and had a habit of avoiding all mention of young me when in their society. She had therefore desire o postpone for herself and Margaret the witticisms which she knew to be inevitable as soon as Mr. Atherton's arrival should be known.

Marianne had once remarked that, though the rent of Barton Cottage was said to be low, they had it on very hard terms, as they were under the necessity of dining at the Park whenever anyone stayed with either family. Mrs, Dashwood had long ago decided that she did not choose to accept such frequent invitations; but in her own case she felt that she paid over and over again for the advantages of her pretty house in the annoyance she experienced in having her daughter's affections and prospects made the subject of continual joking and surmise on the part of Sir John and Mrs, Jennings. The real regard which the family at Barton Cottage entertained for Mrs. Jennings's kindness of heart did not lessen their disapproval for the freedom of her manners; and Sir John, in the course of the four or five years of their acquaintance, had developed no such admirable qualities as to make his tedious vulgarity endurable. Mrs. Dashwood was too truly amiable to speak either of or to her neighbours in any censorious fashion, but she often marvelled at the calmness with which Margaret received their sallies, and wondered if her youngest daughter could be lacking in some of the fine sensibility which so distinguished Marianne, and the delicacy of feeling which was Elinor's greatest charm.

Margaret had long ago made up her mind to present a calm front to Sir

John's attacks and his mother-in-law's jocularity. She had a painful remembrance of the day when she had hinted before Sir John at the secret of Edward Ferrar's attachment to Elinor. She had suffered in consequence. Elinor had felt the indignity of this public discussion of her private affairs, and Margaret had incurred her resentment. This had been no light matter in Barton Cottage. Miss Dashwood had a manner of expressing herself which, though perfectly gentle, was none the less reproving, and neither her mother nor her sisters could face the possibility of Elinor's displeasure with equanimity. Margaret came to dread Sir John's jokes, his drinking to her sister's best affections, his allusions to the letter F, his sly inquiries, fully as much as Elinor could herself; and, while Miss Dashwood could feel that these annoyances were entirely undeserved, to Margaret's distress was added a sense of guilt, which only increased as time went on and she became more fully aware of her mistake.

When her sisters married, and she herself became the object of the raillery at Barton Park, she made up her mind that smiling calm would prove the best defense; that she would show nothing, and if possible feel nothing, of vexation, and that no one, not even her mother, should have reason to suppose her affected by any remark on the subject of love and marriage.

Margaret and her mother occupied themselves in silence for some time after their visitors had taken their leave. Mrs. Dashwood had spent some months with her married daughters in the quiet elegance of their homes, where beaux and courtship were not the subject of attention. She felt her serenity threatened by the recent incursion, but Margaret, as she sat engaged with some needlework, looked so unconscious of any disturbance that Mrs. Dashwood's spirits returned to their usual level.

"I look forward eagerly to the arrival of our guest," she said. "He will bring us some news of your brother and his wife."

"We may hear how little Henry says his piece, and what schemes for economy my brother has in his mind," replied Margaret, "but I do not expect news."

Though Mrs. Dashwood's contempt for John and Fanny could hardly be a

secret to anyone but herself, she was always ready to champion the absent; and she now remarked with approval that Fanny was indeed a devoted mother, and that John's caution in expenditure might be of great service to little Henry.

Margaret's reply was that she considered Mrs. John Dashwood an admiring rather than a devoted mother, and that she did not think her brother was really consistent in his economies, which were prompted more by meanness than by caution.

Mrs. Dashwood admitted that she preferred wise expenditure, and the conversation was not continued.

A slight shower was followed by sunshine so brilliant as to draw Mrs. Dashwood to the window in admiration. She was just in time to see a curricle draw up and a very fine-looking young man descend.

"This must be our guest," she cried, and noted with approval his air of fashion and the becoming cut of his many-caped driving coat.

A moment later and he was bowing to the ladies in the parlour, and expressing his felicitation in being admitted to their quiet home circle. He had, he said, spent the night at Exeter, and been so overcome by the beauty of the Cathedral and the charm of the surroundings that he had been in no great hurry to continue his journey. However, here he was at last and, had he known that so much beauty and so much charm awaited him, he would have been up betimes in order to make his stay the longer.

Mrs. Dashwood replied that they were themselves but just returned home, and rang the bell for Thomas to show her guest to his apartment.

Mr. Atherton's conversation could be checked, but could not be diverted. He had come prepared to admire Margaret, and admire her he would. He was in the habit of recounting his experiences, and recount them he would. The dinner-table served as an appropriate opportunity for both. Mrs, Dashwood and her daughter must perforce listen, and no interruption beyond the offering of a dish by Thomas, or some gentle direction to the Servant on the part of Mrs. Dashwood, was possible. He was sure of his audience and of their attention, and took all else for granted.

After a careful description of his journey he allowed himself to return to more personal topics.

"I have had the pleasure of meeting your son and his charming wife, madam. They were so good as to ask me to dine with them and, after dinner, I had the felicity of beholding a portrait of yourself and your two lovely daughters, the work, so I understand, of your eldest and most highly gifted daughter. I was therefore in some degree prepared—I may say I expected almost a disappointment, but such is far from being the case."

Mrs. Dashwood thought it best to misunderstand, and said with a pleasant smile that Barton was a pretty, agreeable place and the neighbourhood a good one, She could answer for it that Mr. Atherton would find it no disappointment, but possibly beyond his expectations. Mr. Atherton would not allow his compliments to be so misinterpreted. His gallantry must not be wasted on the village of Barton when it was intended to bring the smile of pleasure to Miss Margaret's bright eyes. He said as much, and received no reply from either lady. However, he was satisfied that his meaning had been made clear to them, and was for the present content to leave the subject of Margaret's beauty and to display the perfection of his taste in some other particulars,

"You have a very pretty dining-parlour, madam, and a charming prospect, but that mulberry tree is too near. Take my advice, madam, and have it cut down. You would then secure a beautiful open view across the valley."

Mrs. Dashwood was so good as to give her reasons for sparing the tree. They were that the tree was an old one and supplied some shelter from prevailing winds, and that she and her daughter were partial to the fruit. Mr. Atherton considered these excuses should weigh but lightly against the improved health which might be expected from the removal of the tree. Trees too near a house were unhealthy. Small rooms were also to be deplored. Did Mrs. Dashwood not consider this dining-parlour too small for comfort?

"Our party is a small one," replied Mrs. Dashwood. "It is large enough for my daughter and myself, and it is seldom that we have any company."

"Still, a spacious room is much to be desired. I would never willingly dine in a room less than twenty feet long. Twenty feet or perhaps twenty-two. The feeling of being cramped for space is, I think, intolerable. I should recommend your throwing this room and the adjoining one together. You would then have a very handsome room, one of which you could be justly proud."

"But I should have only one parlour," Mrs, Dashwood protested, "and there is a passage between this and the sitting-room."

"All the better! You could include the passage, and have a noble room indeed. A sitting-room could very easily be built on the lawn there. True, you must then cut down the mulberry tree, but that would be all to the good. They are untidy trees, and the wood is, I believe, capital fuel."

Margaret suggested that these improvements would be expensive.

"No, I assure you, the cost would be trifling," was his reply. "My father's own brother enlarged his house in some such way, and the cost was really nothing, a mere song, and the improvement beyond all words. His room was majestic. No other description would suffice. Truly majestic!"

Mrs. Dashwood declared that she and Margaret lived so quiet a life that a cosy room was all they desired.

Mr. Atherton considered this point, but would not concede it. It gave him, however, a fresh impetus. He now perceived another subject on which his advice might be of value.

"But, madam," he protested, "is it well, do you think, to lead so quiet a life? You should travel. Nothing so enlarges the mind and refreshes the intellect as travel. Let me urge you to take Miss Margaret travelling."

"We are but just returned from a visit," said Mrs. Dashwood, still smiling, "and I think we are ready for a little quiet. The garden is a pleasure, and my daughter has her instrument."

"Nothing to the purpose," asserted Mr. Atherton solemnly. "The enjoyment of music, the pleasures of scenery, the delights of conversation are all enhanced by travel, and nothing can take the place of travel as a means of improving the mind."

Mrs. Dashwood, having intercepted a look from Margaret, was unable to make any reply, and Margaret interposed sweetly to allow her mother time to recover her gravity.

"Where do you suggest our travelling, sir ? What have you done yourself that you can recommend?"

Then it appeared that he was no traveller himself. He had often wished to travel, and had always been prevented, sometimes by inclement weather, sometimes by engagements in town, once by an exceedingly bad cold, but he was an advocate for travel in general, and believed every one was the better for it.

Mrs. Dashwood mentioned the theatre, and Mr. Atherton hastened to inform her that Drury Lane was in the course of rebuilding, that Edmund Kean was the finest actor of the day, that Mrs. Siddons was growing old, that Lady Macbeth was undoubtedly her finest part, and that the theatre generally had undergone a change for the better in the past few years.

Mrs. Dashwood hardly knew what to do with so much information. She was attempting some reply when Margaret gently interposed with some remark about the new publications, and in a moment he was off again, talking of Scott, of Campbell, of Lord Byron, and of Southey without intermission and without any real perception, till the ladies seized the opportunity of a moment's hesitation to rise from the table and leave him to his wine.

Mr. Atherton soon followed them. Mrs. Dashwood had taken the precaution to have by her some volumes of poetry, and on his appearance immediately begged him to read aloud. He selected "The Lady of the Lake," and the evening was passed in tolerable comfort listening to his rhythmic rendering of the adventures of James Fitz-James.

CHAPTER IV

THE next morning found the Barton Cottage guest as eagerly determined on gallantry as ever. He appeared at the breakfast table full of admiration and discourse, and allowed no opportunity to slip of showing himself to be at once an ardent observer of beauty and an able critic in every department of life. He worked hard at the display and it was by no fault of negligence that he was unsuccessful in impressing the ladies.

Mrs. Dashwood was not without surprise. His admiration of Margaret was too determined to be altogether genuine and it was matter for wonder that he should be so anxious to secure her good opinion on any other grounds than those of real preference. Her fortune was small in fact, and there was nothing in their way of living to suggest that it was considerable. Mrs, Dashwood therefore acquitted him of mercenary designs, but felt at a loss as to what motive should be attributed to him. Possibly the whole thing was mere vanity and display.

She had arrived at this conclusion by the time breakfast was finished, and spoke her intention of walking out after she had given her orders for the day. Mr. Atherton begged to be allowed to accompany her, and the permission was reluctantly given, but was immediately made valueless by the timely entry of Sir John. Never had she been so glad to see his ruddy face and to hear his hearty voice! He was surprised himself at the warmth of his reception. Though he had not perceived anything amiss on former occasions, he must be conscious of the extreme pleasure with which he was greeted now. The pleasure was not however unalloyed. He came to suggest that he might have the satisfaction of taking Mr. Atherton round the village and making him known to his parishioners. So far all was to the good, and the attention to Mr. Atherton greatly appreciated by all present; but the happy effect was spoiled by what followed.

“If Miss Margaret will forgive me for taking her beau away from her for a morning. Never mind, Miss Margaret, you shall have his company this

afternoon, and be able to show him off too, and turn Miss Nancy green with envy, for I am charged by Lady Middleton to beg that you will do us the honour of dining with us to-day; you and Mr. Atherton and Mrs. Dashwood too, if she will be so good."

Mrs. Dashwood was not in the habit of accepting casual invitations to the Park, but on this occasion she thought it best to do so. The evil of allowing Margaret and Mr. Atherton to appear there without her seemed greater than that of herself enduring the tediousness of the engagement. She therefore accepted with her usual grace, and Sir John and Mr. Atherton went off together, leaving the ladies entirely without regret at their departure.

"Can this possibly be endured?" was the question in both their minds. "Is there no way to avoid the continued infliction of the young man's presence?"

Mrs. Dashwood was a fortunate woman in that a circumstance which to some people would be a grief often presented itself to her happy temperament in some other light. Mrs. Thomas greeted her mistress with a very long face. Her husband was far from well, was, in fact, quite unfit for his duties and, with this gentleman in the house, Mrs. Thomas really did not see how things could be as they should. It was very much against her husband's wishes to fail his mistress at such a time, but it was hoped that she would understand. Mrs. Dashwood cut short the apologies. Of course Thomas must take the necessary rest. All could well be arranged. They were dining at the Park that day, and she had no doubt that Sir John and Lady Middleton would relieve the Cottage of their guest. It would be quite simple for Mr. Atherton to be transferred to the Park. Meanwhile, they would send word to the apothecary to ask him to visit the Cottage and recommend treatment. Mrs. Thomas did not think this necessary, and the interview closed with mutual esteem; Mrs. Thomas admiring Mrs. Dashwood as a kind and considerate mistress, and Mrs. Dashwood full of appreciation for the worthy pair who would be the means of ridding her of her uncongenial guest.

Margaret was soon acquainted with this desirable prospect, and expressed

all the elation expected by her mother. She really felt satisfaction and relief, but a considerable portion of her mind was unaffected by this. She was experiencing some depression of spirits. The return home had been eagerly anticipated. She did not greatly enjoy the visits to her sisters' houses. She was there of little importance to anyone, and her mother, her chief companion, was, naturally, absorbed in the delight of playing with her grandchildren and advising their mothers. Delaford was no very pleasurable abode for Margaret; and now, when she was come home, what did she find? Sir John and Mrs. Jennings with their curiosity and jocularity. Lady Middleton, true, was not yet encountered, but what hope was there that she would be less cold, less conventional than was her wont? Miss Nancy Steele? Uneducated! Inquisitive! What improvement could be looked for there? Mr. Atherton, who might have brought some interest into their surroundings, was more tedious, more utterly uninteresting than any of the others. He had not even the charm of familiarity.

Her mother was her only comfort and, even there, so much brightness and eagerness were sometimes hard to appreciate. She would like so many people, was so determined to think well of every one, so universally affectionate and credulous. Her dislike of Mr. Atherton was a relief, but even that would only last a few days. Once he was out of the house, and need only be listened to on occasions, he would take his place as one of "our kind neighbours who must be treated with attention."

Margaret felt that her spirits required some change, and she decided to take a walk which had been a favourite one with Marianne and herself ever since their first coming to Barton Cottage. She would climb the High-church down, and there, meeting the fresh wind, she would escape from the discontent and weariness of spirit of which she was ashamed. Her mother made no objection, and she started on her solitary ramble, There was now no Elinor at hand to suggest that every one should take exercise together in the same direction at the same time. Mrs. Dashwood and Margaret were able to do as they wished without comment. This was something to cause rejoicing and, as Margaret mounted the hill in the spring sunshine, her

spirits rose also.

The slope she ascended led directly from their garden gate, and she recalled, as she hastened up it, that day some four years ago, when she and Marianne were caught in a sudden storm on the summit, and raced each other down the hill. Marianne caught her foot, and sprained her ankle. Willoughby had appeared—‘ Marianne’s preserver.” She remembered with a smile that it was she who had given him the name. Willoughby had appeared, and had carried her sister to the house, and the next few weeks had been all romance and excitement, until the dreadful time had come when Marianne had wept all day, and her mother and Elinor went about with grave sad faces, and no one ever thought of telling her what it was all about. Then her sisters had gone to London and she and her mother had spent happy months together, all too soon ended with Marianne home ill and Elinor more severe than ever. After all there was nothing to excuse so much unhappiness, for Elinor had married Edward Ferrars, and they seemed to like each other very well, and not to mind being rather quiet and dull; and Marianne had married Colonel Brandon, although she always said he was too old to think of marrying, and Marianne was not only happy, but rapturously so; and she did not seem to think the Colonel dull at all, and would certainly have minded very much if he had been so.

All of which passed through Margaret’s mind as she climbed, and convinced her that she missed Marianne very greatly, and that it was her absence which was the chief cause of her own discontent.

A sharp gust of wind met her on the summit, and, to her consternation, the light scarf which she held round her shoulders was lifted from her grasp and blew away across the down. She hurried after it, hoping that it might catch on some tuft of grass, or stone, or hawthorn tree, and over the next rise she encountered it again.

It was in the hands of a young man of pleasing appearance, who had evidently caught it on the wind, and was looking at it with great interest. She paused on seeing him, and he, at the same moment perceiving her, hurried towards her with a smiling face to return her property. His manner

was so open and unaffected, his pleasure in being of use so evident, his eye so bright, his person so agreeable, in fact, his whole bearing so truly amiable that she felt some regret that it seemed right to do no more than accept the scarf, proffer her thanks and turn away to descend the hill.

This was not at all what he approved, however, and he asked at once if she had not intended to walk on the down in the direction from whence he came. Margaret admitted that this was so, and was proceeding on her walk when she found to her surprise that he intended to walk with her. Perhaps she was wrong to allow it, but it was not easy to object without incivility, and he walked by her side with such easy grace and without the appearance of thinking that he was behaving in any way out of the ordinary. It was pleasant and it was very unexpected, and Margaret was in a mood to appreciate either.

They walked for some three-quarters of an hour, conversing on general topics when the high wind made it possible. She parted from him where they had met without having learnt his name or told him her own.

As she returned to the Cottage she decided to say nothing of this encounter. “It is of no moment,” she thought. ‘‘We shall never meet again. My mother might think me indiscreet. She might even speak of it. They might come to the knowledge of it at the Park.”

With that dreadful thought her mind was finally made up. She would not speak of the agreeable stranger to anyone at all.

CHAPTER V

DINING at the Park was an event which possessed neither interest nor novelty. Margaret did not anticipate any pleasure beyond the minor ones of excellent food and elegant surroundings. Her mind was, however, so pleasantly occupied with the event of the morning that she dressed for the engagement with a happy smile and, on joining her mother and Mr. Atherton in the hall, and preparing to set out for their walk to the Park, she looked so pretty that Mrs. Dashwood gazed at her with the tenderest affection and Mr. Atherton with an admiration which for once was genuine.

As they crossed the grounds of the Park, Mrs. Dashwood's replies were absent-minded and Margaret said nothing at all. Mr. Atherton had to supply all the conversation himself, a feat which was to him no feat at all, for he barely stopped talking all the way, and yet arrived untired and with fresh stores of information to be expended at the dining-table of Barton Park. Here, however, he was unable to have things as he liked. Sir John Middleton was fond of talking himself, Mrs. Jennings had no notion of being silent, and Miss Nancy Steele seldom paused except for breath. It was a thoroughly noisy party, and for the most part a happy one. Lady Middleton was pleased with her appearance, and that of her dining-table, and only Mrs. Dashwood and her daughter fell short of enjoyment.

Mrs. Dashwood was at her best only in her own house. She did not care for dinner engagements or desultory conversation, and the glare, heat and noise at Barton Park were irksome to her. Margaret was as usual the subject of much jesting, but shared this honour with Miss Steele, who soon succeeded in inducing the main stream of the wit to flow in her direction.

Mr. Atherton was placed between them, with the usual allusion to roses and thorns, and it was supposed that Miss Steele and Margaret would enter into competition to secure his notice. Miss Steele's victory was almost too easy.

"Take care, cousin, the Doctor shall hear of this," called Sir John from the

head of the table. “Don’t imagine you are safe. I have his address I think. Dr. Davis, Dash Street, Plymouth, isn't it? We'll soon let him know how you behave.”

“What does it matter to me what the Doctor hears?” called Miss Nancy in delighted protest “He’d better mind his own business I say, and so I should say if he were here, right to his face.”

“We'll get him here, cousin. That’s what we'll do, and see if you don’t call another tune.”

“A fine thing it would be if I couldn’t speak to anyone but him. I wonder what he would have thought of me yesterday, for there was a very fine young man in the coach with me, and he was most excessively polite with the baggage, and asked me if I would have the window np, and did I like a corner seat. Most attentive, he was! And he got down, not half a mile from Barton Park, and I heard him tell the guard he was a stranger, and he asked for some direction, but there was an old woman coughing in the road and I could not hear any more.”

Sir John’s attention was attracted. He did not always pay Miss Steele the compliment of listening to her, but a man in the neighbourhood with whom he was unacquainted, a stranger, was a matter of interest to him. He wondered who could have a guest without his having previous knowledge of it.

Mrs. Jennings surmised. ‘‘Was it, perhaps, Mr. Willoughby coming to visit Mrs. Smith?”

Miss Nancy was positive. "La, now! Should I call Mr. Willoughby a stranger after all that’s come and gone? Why, I should be ashamed to mention him in the present company.”

Mrs. Dashwood, on hearing her daughter’s disappointment thus delicately referred to, engaged Lady Middleton in a more animated conversation than that lady often experienced. Margaret, however, heard good Mrs. Jennings say:

“Sh! Sh! We don’t speak of that now. Miss Marianne would not like it remembered! If this was not Mr. Willoughby, who in the world can it have

been?"

"His name was Pennington," said Miss Nancy.

"Ha! Ha! cousin, so you've exchanged names and addresses I see. The poor, poor Doctor! I wouldn't give a button for his chance now."

"No, Sir John, there you are wrong. I hope I know my dignity better than to be asking a strange young man for his address. I just peeped at the label on his luggage when he got down at a change, and the name was Pennington, as large as life."

"Pennington? I don't know a Pennington," considered Sir John. "But I tell you what, cousin! We will find out and invite him to the ball next week, and we will get the Doctor too, and, with Mr. Atherton here, we will be able to find out who is your beau after all. Only tell 'em from me that if they want to cut each other's throats they must do it outside on the lawn there. Her ladyship will not have bloodshed in the drawing-room."

Her ladyship caught only the last word, but it suggested to her a mode of release from a conversation which had become wearisome. She immediately got the ladies moving away from the dining-room, where they left Sir John and Mr. Atherton to discuss their wine and politics, with the usual parting admonition that they should be speedy.

In the drawing-room the party divided into two groups. Lady Middleton and her mother listened with sympathy to the account Mrs. Dashwood gave of Thomas's health and very ready was the offer of hospitality for Mr. Atherton at the Park to relieve the household at the Cottage of their guest. Mrs. Dashwood again had reason to feel that, however tedious their society might be, they were indeed the kindest of neighbours.

Margaret meanwhile was the recipient of Miss Nancy's confidences so heartrendingly curtailed at the dining-table, and it was not long before she became privately convinced that her acquaintance of the morning and Miss Nancy's beau were one and the same. How far he deserved the latter appellation she was still uncertain. Possibly he did not deserve it at all; but the thought was unpleasant, and she was grateful to Lady Middleton for suggesting that she should try the instrument, which had not been touched

for many weeks. She remained there till it was time for tea.

The gentlemen appeared in the drawing-room, and Mr. Atherton received the kindest invitation from Lady Middleton, seconded with prodigious warmth by Sir John, to take up his quarters at the Park until his own house should be ready for him.

Mr. Atherton did not demur. It was not beyond his power to convey suitable thanks to Sir John and Lady Middleton, the right regrets to Mrs. Dashwood, the assurance of undying admiration to Margaret, and the suggestion of increasing attention to Miss Steele all in the same sentence and almost in the same breath. The circumstance was undoubtedly of value to him. His consequence would be increased by his association with Barton Park and, though anxious for some reasons to improve his position with Margaret, opportunities must offer, even when separated from her by half a mile. The society at the Park was very congenial to him. The same obtuseness of feeling, conventionality of expression and denseness in understanding, which were his, also distinguished the inmates of the Park.

At Barton Cottage he had not been perfectly at ease. He had not, he must confess to himself, found Mrs, Dashwood so gracious and charming as he had been led to expect, and the lady whom he held himself destined to install at the parsonage was less able in conversation and not so easily entertained as he had hoped. She had yawned twice during his reading of "The Lady of the Lake," and was at all times disconcertingly silent. Not that he was disconcerted by her silence. Not in the least! But he must admit to himself that the agreeable circle at the Park had been a great relief.

Margaret heard the invitation given and accepted with calm satisfaction, and the evening ended with a quiet stroll back across the Park grounds with her mother, followed by Sir John's man, who was to pack Mr. Atherton's personal belongings and take them to the Park, where he himself remained.

It was a welcome change, and Mrs. Dashwood's tender solicitude for Thomas when she got home was deepened by the feeling that she and Margaret had reason to feel very much obliged to him indeed.

CHAPTER VI

THE next day was so delightfully fine that Margaret professed herself unable to stay in the house, and begged her mother's indulgence for taking another long walk. Mrs. Dashwood agreed at once. She supposed that Margaret shared her apprehension that Mr. Atherton would appear during the course of the morning to sit with them, and sympathized with her daughter in desiring to escape. For herself she must bear the infliction, but believed that Margaret's absence would make it a short one. She purposely made no inquiry as to Margaret's direction and would inform Mr. Atherton only that her daughter was walking. She expected a slight annoyance, but it was a much greater one that arrived. The post brought a letter from Mr. John Dashwood. It was as follows:

NORLAND PARK, SUSSEX.
April 15th, 1813.
My Dear Madam,
You will no doubt feel some surprise on receiving a letter from me, but have no fear, we are all well, and Fanny desires her best respects.
You will have with you at this time the new incumbent of the living of Barton, Mr. Atherton, and I trust his manners and address are as pleasing to you as they were to ourselves. A very fine young man indeed, and it is a satisfaction to feel that he owes his preferment, though indirectly, to our interest. No doubt a certain happy possibility will have occurred to you, madam, and rest assured it has not been absent from our thoughts. Mr. Atherton comes to you prepared to admire your daughter, and at Fanny's express wishes I offer my assistance in securing the settlement of my sister. I told Mr. Atherton plainly that, in the event of his marrying my sister, I was prepared to increase her fortune by one half. I did not inform him of the amount of her fortune, and it may be that he has formed a hope that it is larger than the one thousand pounds left to her by my honoured uncle.

However, in the event of this happy occurrence you may rely on my holding to my share of the bargain, and I will increase her fortune by five hundred pounds.

Margaret is a special favourite of my dear wife's, and it is at her instigation that I make this offer. She is most anxious to see all our sisters comfortably settled. As she wisely points out, they will then be independent, and we do not wish our dear Harry to be responsible for the support of his aunts, much loved as they undoubtedly would be. One point I must endeavour to make clear. This offer has only been made in the event of my sister becoming Mrs. Atherton. Should she fail to receive his addresses, should they not be made, or even should they be refused, she must be content with the same fortune as her sisters, bequeathed to them by my good uncle. Fanny is particularly anxious that this should be made clear to Margaret. As she wisely and affectionately says, "We must not allow our sister to become the prey of any fortune-hunter."

Little Harry desires his love to his grandmother, and believe me, dear madam, to be

Your affectionate son,

John Dashwood.

To say that this letter angered Mrs. Dashwood is to fall far short of the truth. Her gentleness and kindness of manner concealed a nature more ardent than the generality. Her feelings on reading John Dashwood's letter were indescribable. Indignation and disgust filled her mind to the exclusion of all else for some time, till, taking up the letter to reread some phrase of which the insolence was not really lessened by unconsciousness of offence, her eyes fell on the statement that Margaret was a special favourite with her sister-in-law. The opposite feelings entertained for Fanny by Margaret struck her sense of the ludicrous, and she read over the whole letter with her appreciation of its absurdity happily awakened.

It is possible to be angry alone, but a joke must be shared. Mrs. Dashwood's sense of what was proper forbade any mention of the letter to

Margaret. Marianne would be angered but not amused. Elinor's more delicately balanced mind would perceive the ridiculous while reprobating all that was objectionable. To Elinor she would write, enclosing the letter, and expressing herself with all the warmth of which she was capable. Elinor was a perfectly safe confidante. Her discretion was absolutely to be relied on, and to Elinor she could allow herself that freedom of speech which only excited Marianne and seemed sometimes to alienate Margaret.

She wrote also to John Dashwood, thanking him for his letter and remarking that she had no expectation of the kind to which he alluded. She added merely love to little Harry, and omitted all mention of Fanny. A "curiously cold letter" this was considered at Norland Park, but, as Fanny added for her own satisfaction: "Some people are unable to express themselves in letters. It is a mark of good breeding to be able to do so, but, unfortunately, every one does not possess the gift."

John remarked with admiration that his Fanny would always make excuses for every one, and that he dared say his mother-in-law meant very well and felt more gratitude than she expressed.

Mrs. Dashwood enclosed a copy of her reply to Norland Park in her letter to Elinor, and felt that she had washed her hands of the affair.

Fortunately for Mr. Atherton, he did not call on her that morning. He considered it to be his duty to his parishioners to pay a visit to every humble dwelling, and this would occupy the whole morning. He sent this message by Sir John, who added: "However, he hopes to be allowed to wait on you to-morrow morning, so Miss Margaret need not think him faithless just yet."

Mrs. Dashwood replied that her daughter would be most unlikely to think anything about the matter, but Sir John only looked wise, and murmured something about "young ladies," which Mrs. Dashwood did not wish to understand.

An awkward silence was broken by Sir John. He had made inquiries about Miss Nancy's other beau, and found that there was some one of the name of Pennington staying at the farm near the Abbeyland—Grice's farm.

‘‘He is some relation of Mrs. Grice, and comes of very low people. It seems he is in the navy, but the navy admits all degrees nowadays. I am afraid Miss Nancy will be disappointed. Lady Middleton will not have him invited to the Park, though for my own part, if a man is a well-looking man and a good sportsman, it does not matter to me who his grandfather was. However, her ladyship’s views are different, and we all have to do as our wives say we must.”

Mrs. Dashwood was only interested in this in so far as she imagined that, while Sir John ran on about Miss Nancy’s beau, it was impossible for him to touch on anything relating to the state of her own daughter’s affections. She therefore welcomed the change of conversation, and they agreed very comfortably over the evils of chance acquaintanceships and the deplorable mixture of classes which obtained in the navy.

Margaret’s walk had been taken in the same direction as that of the previous day. She did not resolve to go in that direction. Her feet carried her thither. She had formed no opinion as to what or whom she would find when she reached the summit of High-church down, but it was not surprise that caught her breath, and not displeasure that brought her to a standstill when she came in sight of her companion of yester-morning, and was greeted by him with all the warmth and civility which would have been justified only by long acquaintance.

Somehow, justification seemed unnecessary. He was there, and she was with him. The wind was not so boisterous this morning; and, as they walked side by side, she could hear all that he told her. He had been in many parts of the world, much in the Mediterranean and in the East Indies. He had been at Trafalgar when a lieutenant in the “Orion.” He had seen Lord Nelson and Admiral Collingwood. He hoped to be employed again shortly. In the meanwhile he had come to see an old cousin of his mother’s, who lived in this neighbourhood, and who had been his nurse. Her name was Mrs. Grice. Did she know Mrs. Grice? Margaret assented. He had more to tell her of his journeys and of his home-comings. How different was this flow of talk to that which she had endured from the new vicar! So

quiet, so easy was his manner, so modest and impersonal his account of his adventures, the interest so real and sustained!

He asked no questions, but Margaret found that she was telling him something of her own life and more of her own thoughts than she had ever told. The hour that they passed in each other's company seemed short. They parted, and Margaret returned home.

This time she was resolved that her mother should know of the meeting. It was all a chance occurrence, and of no real importance, but she felt it right to tell her mother the little there was to tell.

She opened the door, and found Sir John sitting with Mrs. Dashwood. He rose to greet her; and, casting about in his mind for a suitable witticism, he hit on the very thing to make her reconsider her resolution.

"I have sad news for Miss Nancy when I get back to the Park. Her new beau is only a common fellow after all, a relation of the Grice who has the farm near the Abbeyland. No good at all! She will have to set her cap at Atherton, Miss Margaret, so you must keep on the look out to be ahead of her."

Never had Margaret's sweet smile of composure been harder to maintain. Sir John's jokes had always been distasteful. To-day they were some thing more, Her mother intervened.

"You look tired, my love. You have walked too far. Sir John will excuse you, if you will go and rest."

Sir John, however, excused himself, and went off with his sad news for Miss Nancy, after securing Margaret's promise to join in a ball at the Park next Monday when the moon would be at its full, and it would be possible to collect the young people from all parts of the neighbourhood.

"Sir John is a kind neighbour,' Mrs. Dashwood remarked absently.

Had she omitted to make that statement, it is possible that Margaret would have told her of the morning's meeting. With Sir John's kindness the subject of commendation it seemed all at once impossible. What could her mother say beyond giving her the conventional warnings and the obvious gentle reproof? Margaret decided that the whole thing was too unimportant

to be spoken of. She did not intend to walk in the direction of High-church down again and, even if she did, it was improbable that her acquaintance would do the same, She did not allude to the matter, but listened with apparent interest to her mother's account of Thomas’s progress and Sir John’s visit.

CHAPTER VII

MARGARET held to her resolution not to walk on High-church down next morning. She found it increasingly hard to do so, and became conscious of deeper dejection of spirits with every hour of sunshine that passed.

Mr. Atherton came and talked of the family at the Park, and of most of the families in the village. If interest in other people's affairs makes a good parish priest, there was no doubt that he would be an excellent one, but it was more and more clear that the even more desirable qualities of disinterested goodness and refined tastes were deficient. Margaret found it almost impossible to sit still for weariness.

The next day was Sunday, and Mr. Atherton "in the pulpit" was eagerly anticipated by the congregation. Enough to say that he surpassed all expectations, his own and other people's. He was more eloquent than he had thought possible himself; more learned than the simple parishioners had wished; more noisy than Sir John in his slumbrous moments liked; longer than Lady Middleton approved, and even more silly than Mrs. Dashwood and her daughter expected.

Sunday afternoon was spent by Margaret in pacing the shrubbery, and sitting with her mother when she was too weary to continue her exercise.

Monday evening, so eagerly anticipated by other young ladies of Sir John's acquaintance, was looked forward to by Margaret with quiet distaste. She entered the ballroom without the smallest hope of enjoyment. This is frequently exactly the state of mind which leads to the keenest pleasure; and, if the evening did not afford quite that to Margaret, it was at least amusing and interesting beyond her hopes.

She was necessarily engaged to Mr. Atherton for the first two dances and, as she performed her task with all the grace of mind and motion she could summon to her aid, she became aware of an entry which made some stir in the company.

"Mr. and Mrs. Willoughby" were announced, and again she beheld the

man who had once been so familiarly known and so dearly loved by her sister and mother. “Our dear Willoughby!” How often she had heard him so spoken of! He looked older, graver, but handsome, well-dressed as ever, and again his presence and manner put that of other men somewhat in the shade. Amazing man! Wherein lay his charm? She knew him to be faithless, mercenary, careless of other's good, but when he approached her at the end of the first two dances and inquired for her mother and sisters, his deference of bearing, his earnestness and his wish to please overcame at once her remembrance of the distress he had caused. He asked her to dance, and she complied.

He spoke of Marianne, calling her by her name. Was she happy? As beautiful as ever? Did her son resemble her? Was she ever with her mother at Barton? His questions came fast, as if they had been long in his mind.

She answered with what discretion she could, but discretion was swept on one side by his eager inquiries. She knew it to be wrong. He was a married man—had slighted her sister for his present wife. What right had he to such feelings ? What could he mean by so expressing them? He did not, as a fact, mean anything. He was desirous of having news of Marianne, and careless as ever of appearances.

Margaret could not approve, but she found his continued infatuation for her sister in some way engaging. They had met on High-church down. It was but right that young men who frequented the down should be deeply in love. Margaret blushed at her thought, but continued to think it. Light, music and graceful motion do induce these thoughts. Perhaps balls were invented for that very purpose.

The rest of the evening was less interesting. Mr. Atherton claimed another two dances, and a very young Mr. Carey secured another two. Mr. Willoughby applied to her for the last two, but she was tired, tired of him and tired of herself. She pleaded fatigue and sat down till Thomas, now fully recovered, arrived with a lantern, which the bright moonlight made unnecessary.

She was glad to be again in her mother’s parlour and to drink some soup

by the fire, which the chill of April evenings still made comfortable. Her mother's surprise and displeasure on hearing that she had danced with Mr. Willoughby were soon charmed away by her account of his conversation. He had no right to take such liberties, but Mrs. Dashwood was sorry for him. It was but natural that he should still love Marianne—though it was very wrong. It was pleasing that he should so desire to hear of her—but she could not excuse the affront to his wife. Mrs. Willoughby was not at all pretty and looked very ill-tempered, Margaret said, but that was no excuse for neglect. All the same Mrs. Dashwood felt excuses, if she would not make them, and the end of it all was that he was much to be pitied, and that Marianne was much happier as Mrs. Brandon than she ever could have been as Mrs. Willoughby.

Margaret wondered privately if this were so.

CHAPTER VIII

ON Tuesday morning, after the exertion and the excitement of the ball, Margaret's need for fresh air and quiet exercise was excessive. She could not remain within doors, and, once out, she must get to the uplands. She could not be kept for ever from her favourite walk, she argued. In all probability her acquaintance had left the neighbourhood.

At first, when she gained the heights, she thought this must indeed be the case, for she could not see him anywhere. He was lying on the grass not far away. He rose at once and came towards her with reproach in his eyes. Where had she been? He had come here each morning during her absence. She found herself under the necessity of excusing herself for not having joined a stranger on his morning walk. Her excuses were accepted, or at least listened to, and they were off again across the downs. Delightful companionship! Delightful converse! Hot rooms and silly jests seemed far away in this place of open sky and distant prospects.

It was a happy morning and ended, as before, with the parting where they had first met. No promise was made of coming again, but Margaret felt that was understood and, though wondering at herself as she ran down the slope, she knew that she did not mean to fail him.

Now was the time when Mrs. Dashwood must be informed. It would not be right to keep her longer in ignorance. Margaret resolved to tell her mother, and perhaps she could arrange that they should meet. He would come to the Cottage. She was full of virtuous resolves, the performance of which she must, however, postpone, for as she opened the parlour door she heard the high-pitched laughter of Mrs. Palmer, and saw that she and her husband were sitting with Mrs. Dashwood.

Mrs. Palmer was Mrs. Jennings's younger daughter, and consequently, Lady Middleton's sister. Except that both had been admired as beauties, there was no resemblance between the sisters. Lady Middleton seldom spoke more than was necessary, and Mrs, Palmer never stopped talking and

laughing when in company. She had been married very young, and, if her husband seemed a little tired of his wife's conversation and laughter, it was no more than other people felt with less cause. She had her mother's great gift of good humour, and was really very pretty. On the whole, Margaret preferred her to her chilly sister and was usually not averse to her company. To-day she did not want anyone, and it was an effort to retain her composure.

"My dear Miss Margaret! How glad I am we have not missed you! It would have been shocking, and Mr. Palmer would have been so concerned, and so should I. Wouldn't you, my love? Wouldn't you have felt it detestable if we had not seen Miss Margaret?"

Mr. Palmer turned over his newspaper.

"He is so droll. He always pretends he does not hear me, but he hears very well, I know, and he would have been shockingly disappointed if you were not come in. You will wonder why we are come to Barton, though indeed we should have been long since. I have asked and asked Mr. Palmer to bring me, but he would not—always some excuse—until the day before yesterday he comes into my room, and he says, 'Charlotte, will you come with me to see your mother?' 'La, my love,' says I, 'you do not mean it.' And then it all came out. There is a Commander Pennington, an old friend of his, staying here. They were at school together, and he is bent on seeing him again. I knew it was not my mother he wanted to see, for they quarrel whenever they meet, though I believe they like each other very well all the same. Well, we only arrived this morning, and we are to go on to London tomorrow, so there is no time to lose. Mr. Palmer has been to see this Commander, but he was out walking. However, we have left a note asking him to dine up at the Park. Will you not come too, my dear? Mr. Palmer will be so delighted if you are one of the party, for you are a prodigious favourite of his. My love, do help me to persuade Miss Margaret to dine at the Park this afternoon."

"I cannot persuade her if she has not been asked, can I?'' was the only encouragement Mr. Palmer gave.

"La, my love, you know Sir John would ask her at once, and my sister would not mind whether she came or not. You leave all that to me," with a burst of merriment.

Margaret excused herself from accepting this second-hand invitation on the score that she had been at the Park the day before and, though Mrs. Palmer laughed excessively at such a reason, she was obliged to accept it.

"Have you heard anything of the Commander?" asked Mrs. Palmer.

Margaret admitted that she had heard that he was staying in the neighbourhood, and Mrs. Dashwood added that she believed he had travelled with Miss Nancy Steele.

"La, yes, indeed! We have heard all about that," Mrs. Palmer agreed contemptuously, laughing at the recollection.

Mr. Palmer laid aside his paper and got up to take leave. His wife was obliged to do as he did, and at last they were gone.

Margaret went to her room to think the situation out. Soon they must meet at the Park. If it were known that they had met before, who could tell what would be said? More than she could bear to listen to! Her mother ought to know of their acquaintance—of that she was convinced—but it would be easier to tell her later, when Commander Pennington was known to her, and when his quiet deference should have assured her that he had taken no liberty beyond what was natural and right.

Margaret decided, though with an uneasy conscience, to postpone talking to her mother for the present. This was made easier by Mrs. Dashwood retiring to her chamber with a headache, and she herself passed the evening with no company but the firelight and her own thoughts. Happy thoughts and restless thoughts, that ranged from the open down to the dining-room where they were all collected at the Park! Would he hear that she had been invited and had refused to give him the meeting? Would this anger him, or would he, as she thought, understand? In any case, she could hardly have accepted so careless an invitation. She did not want to meet him there, under the fire of comment, but it was inevitable in the next few days. She longed for the happy insensibility of Marianne and Willoughby, who had

never seemed to notice what anyone said, but only what they said to each other, She recollected herself. She was going too fast. She had met the Commander only three times. Marianne and Willoughby had been constantly in each other's society. She must not, would not, imagine so much when so little had occurred.

She took up a book and endeavoured to read. She opened the instrument and played, until she remembered her mother suffering in the room above. She returned to her seat by the fire and became again a prey to restless thoughts.

Tea came in, and she took a cup to her mother. As she descended the staircase there was a knock at the door and, there being no time to return to the parlour, she waited where she was while Thomas opened the door.

"Mrs. Dashwood is unwell, sir. She cannot receive visitors. Miss Margaret, sir? Step in, sir, and I will inquire."

Margaret came down the stairs, greeted the Commander and led him into the parlour.

He had come, he said, to say good-bye. A post had arrived for him, and he had got employment. He was to be in the "Wren," a sloop of war cruising in the Baltic, convoying, for the next six months. He had been dining at the Park, and was walking back to the farm. He could not resist coming. He would not intrude, but must leave early on the morrow, so took this opportunity—

He kept his eyes on her face anxiously, but Margaret's habit of composure concealed her feelings, and he could not know what she suffered.

Thomas had told Mrs. Thomas, and Mrs. Thomas thought it her duty to inform her mistress that a strange gentleman had called to see Miss Margaret. Maternal feelings would no doubt have got Mrs. Dashwood off her bed even if curiosity had failed to do so. She occupied only a few minutes in arranging her dress, and came down to find her daughter and a strange man standing by the fire together. He was holding her hand, and it seemed not unlikely that more might follow.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. DASHWOOD'S astonishment was very great. It was impossible to doubt what She saw, and equally impossible to account for it. Margaret had hardly been away from her during the seventeen years of her life, and how she could possibly be on terms of intimacy with this unknown man was a question to which there seemed to be no answer.

Margaret's feeling on her mother's appearance was relief. She was very young, and unprepared for any great decision. For the moment she had forgotten the amazement her mother must feel, and presented Commander Pennington to Mrs. Dashwood with scarcely less than her usual composure. Mrs. Dashwood could only conceal her feelings under a manner as austere as she was capable of assuming,

There was a pause, but Commander Pennington had the sailor's quickness of perception and simplicity in dealing with a situation.

"I have had the happiness of meeting your daughter on the downs, madam, on one or two occasions."

The word "happiness" seemed to have more than its formal sense as he used it, but the phrase was conventional and Mrs. Dashwood could not object to its use. He continued:

"I have received orders to join my ship immediately and I leave here to-morrow. I called this evening to say good-bye."

He finished with an air of having entirely explained his visit at eight o'clock in the evening at a house where he was a stranger. Nothing, it appeared, could be more reasonable and proper than that he should be there, and be found by her mother holding Margaret's hand.

He sketched out for them his probable employment in the Baltic, convoying merchantmen past the Danish coast to the Island of Riigen. He hoped to be on shore again in about six months, when he would have the happiness of seeing them again.

Mrs. Dashwood found herself included in his cheerful friendliness, and it

was not in her nature to do less than smile, and murmur something which he could take as acquiescence. Margaret meanwhile sat silent. She was happy, in a quiet glow of content. His going seemed remote and he was giving her more and more the belief that She would be his object in coming again. He sat with them for half an hour, conversing with Mrs. Dashwood, whose manner by degrees softened, until at parting she gave him her hand and wished him well. To Margaret he turned as he went out, and, taking her hand, he pressed it and said in a half-audible tone:

"I will come back. You will wait, will you not?" He was gone.

Margaret knew that her mother had a right to an explanation, but to give it seemed beyond her powers. Her mind was agitated, and she longed for solitude and silence. Mrs. Dashwood did not return to her room, but took up her needlework. She did not say anything; but her whole attitude was an unspoken question.

Margaret began with hesitation:

"I do not know him at all well. We just met once or twice on the downs. It was strange of him to call."

What could the tenderest of mothers say to that? Mrs. Dashwood felt her sympathy checked and resorted to quiet reproach.

"But, my Margaret, I do not understand how you came to make his acquaintance. I fear I have allowed you too much freedom. Why have you not told me of your meetings with this man?"

"I do not think that there was anything worth telling about them. I am sorry he disturbed you when you had a headache."

Mrs. Dashwood was angered. Her daughter had concealed from her what was undoubtedly of moment, and now parried her questions with something like insincerity. She sat with a grave face, employing herself with her needlework, and Margaret sat beside her engaged only with her thoughts. She wanted her mother's sympathy, but felt unable to ask for it. All these explanations that were, she supposed, necessary, all this surprise and blame must come first, and all she wanted was to understand and be understood "Wait!" What could she wait for but one thing only? What

could that be but the offer of his hand? He had better have left it unsaid. It was at once too much and too little. Not enough to give her confidence and too much for her peace of mind.

Mrs. Dashwood's thoughts were sadder because more experienced. She was a woman whose ardent nature led her to depths as well as heights, and she was now reflecting with gravity on her own failures in life. She had failed with Elinor. All through Elinor's anxieties about Edward and his engagement to Lucy Steele, she had not known of her daughter's trouble. She had been impatient with her, thought her cold and unfeeling, and sympathized with Marianne, who said what she had only thought. Elinor loved her, she knew, in spite of all, but that was to Elinor's credit, not to her own. Then with Marianne, how she had encouraged her in her attachment to the faithless Willoughby! How ill-judged she had been in allowing him such frequent opportunities! All the sorrow of Marianne's disappointment she laid at her own door. It was her fault entirely. True, Marianne adored her mother, and was the most devoted of daughters when they were together, but that was all due to Marianne's loving nature. She herself deserved only reprobation. Now her Margaret concealed from her, almost lied to her, rather than be troubled with her sympathy, and she herself was uncertain whether to sympathize or to blame were the better course. Either might be as mistaken as anything she had ever done. Mrs. Dashwood's tears began to flow, and instant relief was the result. She glanced aside at Margaret and something in her attitude suggested that she too wept.

When two ladies who have an affection for one another weep at the same time and for the same cause, and the cause is none other than their fear of being unkind to one another, a reconcilement is not far away. A very few moments passed before there were a few gentle embraces, more tears, and Mrs. Dashwood and her daughter were once more in each other's confidence.

Margaret kept nothing back—as she had said, there was very little to make known, and Mrs. Dashwood put all reproach resolutely behind her, and was

tenderly sympathetic. For that evening all was peace and happiness for both of them, and Margaret went to sleep that night with the thought of her mother's affection mingling with the words;

"I will come back. You will wait, will you not?"

CHAPTER X

MARGARET'S first feeling on awaking next morning was relief that her mother now knew all. There had been very little to know or to conceal, but it was a comfort to feel that the reason for her reticence—the apprehension of being talked over at Barton Park—was understood. Mrs. Dashwood was quite ready to seem satisfied by this explanation, though she felt herself at liberty to think what more she chose.

Margaret, by her confidence and by her tears, had ensured herself against any further reproach from Mrs. Dashwood. She was not, however, ensured against discomfort from other causes. No sooner was breakfast over than Sir John's loud voice, Mrs. Jennings's cheerful talking, and Mrs. Palmer's hearty laughter were heard in the hall. Mrs. Jennings could not resist coming to see how Miss Margaret looked after parting with her new beau.

"The Commander is a very fine young man, my dear, though he has such low connections and no fortune to speak of. A good riddance, I say, Mrs. Dashwood! He would not do for Miss Margaret at all, but I will not deny that he is agreeable. Mr. Palmer and he were at it hammer and tongs with their politics and their this and their that. I never heard Mr. Palmer say so much before."

Margaret's only reply was a smile, harder to assume than when young Mr. Carey or Mr. Atherton was the beau referred to. She could not conceive how so much was known, but would not make a single inquiry. It could not be long before something intelligible was uttered when so much was being said by three people all at once.

It was Mrs. Palmer who enlightened her.

"My mother is always for making a joke, but you know we did think it strange when Commander Pennington described you, and asked where you lived. There was something about a scarf to be returned, I think. I did not understand it all. It seems your scarf blew away and he caught it. I hope you have it safe again,"

"Yes," replied Margaret, "it was returned to me."

"Oh," cried Mrs, Jennings, "but that was only the beginning of your acquaintance. And now he is gone, and that had better be the end, Miss Margaret. We cannot have you taken all over the world, when there are several near at hand who would like to keep you here."

Mrs. Dashwood endeavoured to lead the conversation away from Margaret by inquiring as to the intimacy between Mr. Palmer and Commander Pennington. Mrs. Palmer was delighted to be the chief talker, and related how they had been at the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth together, but that Mr. Palmer had succeeded to the property. So it had ended in his not going into the navy after all, and very glad she was of it, as to have a husband at sea would be a shocking thing. She laughed merrily at the thought, and was still more amused at the idea that with the war still going on there would have been danger of her becoming a widow.

"But of course I should never have married him at all in that case, so I should not have minded it in the least, except that of course I should not have liked to be an old maid."

Mrs. Palmer, having been thus providentially spared from early widowhood and perpetual spinsterhood by the circumstance of Mr. Palmer not having entered the navy, was naturally against that profession. She had much to say of its evils, and recounted with hearty laughter the hardships that she knew to be the lot of a naval officer's wife.

She was in her way to London. Mr. Palmer would call for her almost immediately. The House was sitting, and he had his duties as a member. She called specially to know if Mrs. Dashwood had any message for her son and his wife, as she would be very happy to convey it. Mrs. Dashwood was firm that she had no such message to send. She had written to them a day or two ago, and had nothing to add to what she had then written.

Sir John and Mrs. Jennings were warm in giving the usual invitation to dinner. It was urgent in this case, as the loss of Mr. and Mrs. Palmer would leave them disconsolate, a party of five, when only yesterday they had sat down eight to dinner. Mrs. Dashwood could not be so cruel as to refuse.

Mrs. Dashwood was, however, deaf to all calls of humanity, and would have excused her daughter also, but Margaret, seeing clearly that any reluctance on her part to go into society would be construed as "wearing the willow," accepted with seeming satisfaction, and Sir John and Mrs. Jennings returned to the Park easy in their minds that Mr. Atherton's chances were as good as ever.

Mrs. Palmer remained to chatter for half an hour till her chaise arrived, to give Margaret repeated invitations to join her in London, all of which were steadily declined, and to recount over and over again the sayings and doings of her son, only four years old, but already famed for his wit and beauty.

Mr. Palmer came. Margaret would have liked to hear something of his friendships at the Royal Naval Academy, but he had very little to say beyond grumbling at the weather and the roads. Mrs. Dashwood congratulated him on having effected a meeting with his friend, and he replied that it had been very agreeable. He further volunteered that he wished there were more like Pennington, but that was all; and the couple soon drove off, Mrs. Palmer laughing and waving till she was out of sight.

Margaret hardened her mind as she dressed for her dinner engagement that afternoon. She would not pay any attention to their jokes, and she would not understand their questions. She was prepared for much discomfort which she would bear with a smiling face. In the event it was not so bad. As before, Miss Nancy Steele had much to say, and had no idea that Commander Pennington was to be interested in anyone but herself. The Commander and the Doctor took up about the same space in her mind and Mr. Atherton had all the rest. Margaret found that she had no need for defense against jocularity, as all the wit was to be expended elsewhere. Mr. Atherton sat next her and was attentive, but his gallantry took the form of praising her music, and this gave her an excuse to pass most of the time after dinner at the instrument. It was a fine one and to play on it gave her real pleasure.

As Lady Middleton, who was fond of cards, was able to get up a rubber,

and Sir John had been out all the morning and was glad to get some sleep, the party may be said to have been productive of more enjoyment than is usual at such gatherings. There was no one who had not some degree of happiness, and even Miss Nancy Steele, who had Mrs. Jennings for a partner, and would have preferred Mr. Atherton, was consoled by winning three shillings, which would just pay for the new pink ribbons she wished to purchase in time for her next meeting with the Doctor.

CHAPTER XI

THE next few weeks passed without any particular incident to vary their monotony. The summer was a fine one, much of the time was spent out of doors, and, though Margaret might wish for a walking companion, nothing at all was said about it.

The parsonage was now ready for Mr. Atherton, and he went there from the Park early in July. Hardly a day had passed without his calling at the Cottage, and Mrs. Dashwood had come to regard his visits as inevitable and therefore no subject for complaint. He talked too much and had very little sense, but he was an amiable man, and she had come to that time of life when for an acquaintance to be amiable is held to be a recommendation. She felt, or imagined she felt, that she liked people to be dull rather than disagreeable, and uninteresting rather than bad-tempered, and, though it is no doubt regrettable that these opinions are so often held by people of forty years of age and upwards, there may be something to be said for their point of view.

As Margaret had foreseen, Mr. Atherton was now considered to be entitled to Mrs. Dashwood's patient attention, and Margaret herself, whatever she might feel of weariness, treated him with steady gentleness. That she did not believe herself to be thereby giving him what is called encouragement was due to her being without. the suspicion of his desiring anything in particular.

The day came, however, when his wishes were to be made known to her. He arrived one morning with a special request to make. It was that the ladies should lay aside their occupations to walk with him to the parsonage and explore the house and gardens.

"There is much still to be done to both, and I feel the touch of a lady's hand is needed to make the house all that it should be. It is to me a little bleak and bare, and, though I have plans for its improvement, I want to have your sanction, your agreement in what I propose. Your taste and

discernment are needed both within and without."

Mrs. Dashwood professed herself very happy to put her taste and discernment, such as they were, at Mr. Atherton's service. Margaret, as usual, said nothing, but it did appear that her silent consent was needed for the proposed improvements. Their work was laid aside, their walking dresses put on, and they were ready to accompany the young man. Before they left the house he turned to survey the parlour, and said with enthusiasm:

"If I could but achieve this look of home, this air of peaceful industry, in my own house, how happy should I be!"

This admiration for Barton Cottage must have been increased by his daily visits, for it could not be forgotten that his first comments had been mingled with dispraise. There was something forced about so much admiration, and to Mrs, Dashwood's mind there had been more sincerity at first, if less good manners.

He continued in this strain of laborious gallantry as they walked to the parsonage. Mrs. Dashwood became uneasy. She feared to look at Margaret lest she should be unable to continue to listen with suitable gravity, and it was a relief when they turned in at the garden gate and had something definite to attend to.

The garden was very well laid out, with a hen-run and a shrubbery, and apple trees and a rubbish heap, all most convenient. No detail escaped observation, and the garden alone occupied the best part of an hour. They were then led indoors. Fruit and cake were ready on the sideboard in the dining-room, and the rest and refreshment were indeed welcome. The ladies were tired out. Such continual admiration had been demanded of them that they would have been thankful to see something that merited disapproval. But no such relief was to be theirs. The standard of excellence of the house was even higher than that of the garden, and everything must come under their notice. Margaret began to wonder if even the mousetraps in the back larder would escape comment. The brass toasting-fork and the fire-screens, the foot-stools and the wool-work mats had all received their

due, and Mrs. Dashwood lingered behind in the linen-room to examine some fine table-cloths which attracted her.

Margaret was taken on to the study, and walked up to the book-shelves, in the contents of which she felt real interest. To her astonishment she found herself ardently addressed by her host, her hand taken in both of his, and an urgently-worded proposal of marriage laid before her. In a speech of great length, which must have cost him some pains to compose and memorize, he was asking her to become the mistress of the house in which they were standing.

He argued that their tastes were similar, their ideas in unison, and their prospect of happiness very great. She would be settled near her mother, for whom he had an abiding deference. Her indoor pursuits and her outdoor pastimes would be equally considered, and she would find that in her own domain she would be paramount. His arguments were excellent, and he evidently knew his oration by heart, for he never faltered in its delivery or allowed her to interpose any objection. He paused at length and waited for her reply.

She gently declined his offer and begged to be allowed to rejoin her mother. He was not only disappointed, he was surprised, and was preparing to repeat some of his representations when Mrs. Dashwood came into the room, and further protest was impossible. They almost immediately took leave, and to their relief Mr. Atherton only accompanied them as far as the garden gate.

Mrs. Dashwood was quickly told of the offer. Margaret was regretful at giving pain, but surprised at the necessity. She had not thought him attached to her for the reason that she did not think him sufficiently indifferent to wealth and position to wish for a wife with so small a fortune. She did not believe him to have any real regard for her. She had therefore paid little attention to his show of admiration, and none at all to the hints thrown out by Mrs. Jennings. However, the offer had been made, and had been declined, and it remained to be seen whether Mr. Atherton's desire for sympathy would be stronger than his pride; whether he would let his

disappointment be known at the Park, or whether he would keep it to himself.

Perhaps the distress was not so great as to require condolences. Perhaps his vanity preferred secrecy to pity. Perhaps some other cause was at work, but to Margaret's relief it became evident that nothing had been said at the Park, and in many ways it appeared certain that Mr. Atherton had accepted her decision as final.

Often when we think we are safe, calamity is near at hand. Not many days had passed before Mrs. Dashwood and Margaret, returning from their walk, found John Dashwood awaiting them. He was standing by the window, and they could see the annoyance on his face as they turned in at the gate. He was staying at the parsonage, he replied, in answer to Mrs. Dashwood's ready offer of hospitality. He had merely called in to inquire. He did not immediately say what was to be the extent of his inquiries, but it was clear from his expression that something more than their health was involved.

It soon became evident to Margaret that nothing more would be said of his mission so long as she remained in the room. Mr. Dashwood replied to all questions and remarks in monosyllables, and occupied the intervals by looking at her with patient displeasure. She therefore excused herself on the plea of changing her walking dress, and left her mother to listen to whatever it was that john had to impart.

He did not begin at once. Possibly the subject was harder to open than he had expected. It was evident that he was angry, and uncertain whether he were rightly so.

"I hope you are pleased with the work done at the parsonage, and that you find Mr. Atherton is satisfied," said Mrs. Dashwood in the course of her polite inquiries.

Mr. Dashwood replied that it was the dissatisfaction felt by Mr. Atherton, and imparted to himself and Fanny by letter, that had brought him hither.

"My sister is young," he went on, with an air of making every allowance possible. "She cannot be expected to foresee the future. It therefore behoves us to help her in her decision. It cannot, I think, be your wish that

she should decline Mr. Atherton's addresses. She is unlikely, living as she does in retirement, to have such an offer made to her again. Perhaps she is not aware—Mr. Atherton is not of a boastful disposition, and it is probable that she is not aware—that he has a private income in addition to the living and that his expectations are very good. There are several unmarried aunts in good circumstances, and an uncle, also unmarried, who is even wealthy. Margaret would, in all probability, become a rich woman in time. Meanwhile with her small fortune, augmented as Fanny and I suggest, they would be very passably comfortable. Their income would be more than half that of my sister, Elinor, although she married Fanny's own brother. Yes, decidedly Margaret would be in a better position in some ways! Her expectations would be better, and she would be marrying with the good wishes and approval of all concerned, which, as you recollect, my dear madam, was not unhappily the case of Elinor and poor Edward Ferrars. They were honoured by your approval, I am aware, but the grief felt by his excellent and affectionate mother was very distressing. But enough of that! What is done cannot be undone! In Margaret's case no such objection would arise. I think it possible that in good time she might be as rich as Marianne, or even more so, if she succeeded in becoming a favourite with Mr. Atherton's relations. I feel sure that all this has not been laid before her. Possibly you yourself are not aware of it. I blame myself for not having made the matter clearer in a letter which I had the honour of writing to you on the subject. But it is not too late! I have secured from Mr. Atherton the promise that, if he is assured that his proposals will be accepted, he will renew them. This he has definitely agreed to, and his only stipulation is that he should be informed of the alteration in my sister's mind at once, or at least during the ensuing week. After that time he will consider himself at liberty to pay his addresses in another quarter. So, madam, there is no time to be lost if we are to secure this admirable settlement for my sister, and I beg you to use your influence on our behalf."

Mrs. Dashwood had made no attempt to reply. No opportunity to do so had been given her, but now he paused. She reminded him that he had said that

this marriage would have the approval of all concerned. She could not agree. It would not have her own approval. She considered Mr. Atherton a very agreeable good sort of man, but not one likely to make her daughter happy. Margaret's inability to accept his proposals had her approval. The marriage could only take place against her wishes.

This seemed to her to be as strong a statement as was required. John Dashwood, however, did not think so. She had no wealth to enforce her arguments. She made no threat of cutting Margaret out of her will, and even had she done so it would be a matter of minor importance to a young lady favoured by the prospect of such a settlement in life. Obedience to maternal authority could not be expected when so little was to be gained by it. He therefore renewed his arguments, reinforcing them by the information that the elder Mrs. Ferrars had heard of Margaret's prospects and highly approved, and even contemplated sending a wedding present, and that Fanny had written to Lady Middleton begging her kind offices in the matter.

The knowledge that Lady Middleton would certainly take no notice of such a request was Mrs. Dashwood's only consolation. John and his wife were capable of angering her more deeply than any others of her acquaintance. She resented the difference in their thoughts and feelings the more on account of their relationship to her daughters, and she sometimes felt that she would be thankful indeed could she be sure of never seeing or hearing of them again; and that even an open quarrel would be welcome if it could bring about so complete a misunderstanding as must end their intimacy.

CHAPTER XII

JOHN DASHWOOD'S visit to the parsonage was not yet over. He was still making daily demands on the civility and patience of the inmates of Barton Cottage, when such welcome guests arrived as must lessen the disagreeables of his visits. Their circle was enlarged, their conversation improved, and their tempers relieved by the arrival of Elinor and Edward Ferrars. It was a joyful meeting. The influence of Elinor's calm and balanced mind was just what her mother required, wearied and irritated as she had been for the last few days.

Mrs. Dashwood did not intend to confide her deeper anxieties to Elinor, but it was not long before she had done so, and Elinor was put in possession of all that Mrs. Dashwood knew of Margaret's intimacy with Commander Pennington.

Elinor much disapproved of all she heard. Margaret clearly had been very indiscreet and, she feared, rather sly in concealment. She looked grave, and gave no encouragement to be happy to her mother, who had therefore to supply all arguments for cheerfulness herself, and did so to good purpose, representing that Margaret knew him so slightly it was impossible that she should be much affected, and, at the same time, he was so agreeable a man that a marriage between them would be highly satisfactory; that six months at least must pass before they met again, which was time enough for them either to change their minds or to make them up, whichever process were desirable; that he had no doubt enough money to marry on, but that Elinor herself must know that money was not an essential for happiness. In fact, she argued all ways at once, and the only circumstance that seemed certain and fixed was that Margaret was to be happy and that all was for the best.

Elinor listened, glad that her mother should be able to console herself, but privately deeply concerned at what she considered to be unwise. She determined to bring the subject up with her sister, and to let it be known how much she feared an unhappy ending to the affair.

In the meantime she was able to give all the sympathy that was desired over the annoyance of her brother's interference. Mr. Atherton seemed to her a very poor figure of a parish priest. She had always before her the idea of Edward, so generous and devoted in his work, so refined in mind, unworldly and of such genuine goodness that the type of clergyman of which Mr. Atherton seemed to be an example was altogether disgusting to her. She warmly supported her sister and mother in their dislike of him, and John Dashwood, who could get nothing but calm disagreement and denials from Mrs. Dashwood, was even more daunted to find that Elinor was no more open to reason than his mother-in-law.

He had no wish to offend anyone, and presently gave up his self-imposed task of getting Margaret a husband with the warning that he was by no means prepared to endow her choice or that of her mother, as he would have endowed his own. Mrs. Dashwood seemed hardly to regard this loss of five hundred pounds. Indeed, the only way to be sure that she had fully understood the matter was to repeat his ultimatum more than once. He returned to Norland Park unsuccessful in his errand, but at least, as he told Fanny, he had carried out his father's last injunctions to take care of his sisters and, as the event had turned out, might regard himself as richer by five hundred pounds.

Elinor made an early opportunity to get Margaret alone, with the intention of taxing her with her indiscretion and undue reticence. She began by inviting Margaret to walk with her on High-church down. There was something unexpected about this to Margaret, just enough to put her slightly on the defensive. Elinor's choice of a walk was more often along a road and with some definite good object in view. To-day, however, though the excellent intention was not lacking, she chose the heights. It was a deliberate choice. She wished to recall to Margaret's thoughts Marianne's folly and its melancholy conclusion. She had not reckoned with other visions, other ideas which filled Margaret's mind almost to the exclusion of all else.

Elinor began by reminding her sister of the day of Willoughby's

appearance. Margaret was much surprised at such a subject being introduced. She had been considered as a child by her two sisters, and had met with such severe rebuffs from Elinor on this subject that the idea of discussing the love affairs of one sister with the other was altogether distasteful to her. She listened politely to Elinor's account of the surprise felt by her mother and herself when Willoughby came into the house with Marianne in his arms. Elinor said that she herself had almost immediately felt the deepest uneasiness. Marianne had been so powerfully attracted, the young man was so easily attached; in fact, the whole thing was too light, too casual to be lasting. Elinor, it seemed, had always known this, and had tried to warn Marianne and her mother, but they had disregarded her. If such a case were again to come under her notice she would be able to give the same warnings with a deeper urgency. She could now almost say that she knew how unlikely such a situation was to bring about domestic happiness such as she herself enjoyed.

Margaret listened, agreed, deplored the lack of caution shown by Marianne and the instability of Willoughby, when called upon to do so; agreed again as to the dangers of such intimacies; agreed further that they should be discouraged. Elinor could find no loophole, nothing on which to fasten an inquiry. Nothing but agreement! If Margaret had ever had any idea of confiding in her sister this manner of approach would have decided her against it. She had absolutely nothing to say on the subject.

Elinor bore this in silence for some time, and then, remembering how much trouble might have been spared them if Marianne had been induced to make some statement, she tried again, this time with rather more success,

"Mamma tells me, Margaret, that you have lately made the acquaintance of a certain Commander Pennington."

Margaret's colour was brighter as she agreed again.

"Mamma is anxious about it. She does not think the acquaintance a wise one. She does not think he has much stability of character."

Elinor was more justified in making this statement than seemed likely. Mrs. Dashwood had said much on all sides of the matter in her

perturbation, and it was true that she had expressed some such fear. It was one among many fears; but to Margaret it seemed more. To her it appeared as the considered opinion of her mother on him whom she immediately felt to be her lover. She waited a moment, and then replied quietly that she considered it impossible for either her mother or herself to form an opinion of Commander Pennington's character. The acquaintance was a slight one, and might never be renewed.

Elinor felt it impossible to continue the conversation; but she had said enough—more than enough—to make up Margaret's mind. She was now definitely determined that she would marry Commander Pennington if he asked her, and as definitely certain that she very much wished he would so do.

Margaret owed this self-knowledge to her sister's interference, and felt that she would have had more peace of mind without it.

CHAPTER XIII

SIR JOHN MIDDLETON was so fond of parties that not many days were ever allowed to elapse without his forming some plan to bring young people together. His activities were very well thought of in general, and it was perhaps only the family at Barton Cottage, who were perforce included in all his schemes, who wished him less hospitable and enterprising.

The occasion of Elinor and Edward Ferrars staying at Barton Cottage must receive some special mark of attention from the Park. They dined there as a matter of course, and they drank tea there on the next day, but these entertainments, though they seemed to be sufficient to the Ferrars, were to Sir John the merest foreshadowing of the delights he had in store for them. There was to be a picnic, a ball, and if possible theatricals, and all were set on foot with eagerness.

The picnic was the most easily arranged. They would all walk or drive next Monday to the Priory and eat a cold collation there among the ruins. The Careys and the Whitakers were to be invited, and they would all be together and better able to plan for future happiness.

Monday came, and was not more unsuitable for picnicking than July days usually are. The air was mild, the rain only slight and intermittent, and the ground not particularly wet. It was a pleasant day for walking, and the party from Barton decided to walk as the ruins were little more than a mile distant. The Careys had farther to come and would drive or ride. Only the youngers of this family were to be expected. Sir Francis and Lady Carey were disinclined to leave their home occupations whenever Sir John Middleton wanted a little company, but the young people would arrive in satisfactory numbers. Walter Carey, who would be the next baronet, his two elder sisters, and his two younger sisters in charge of their governess. The Whitakers, a middle-aged couple with a son and a daughter, had accepted and would certainly drive.

The Barton party was the largest. Sir John and Lady Middleton and their

children, Mrs. Jennings and Miss Steele, reinforced by Mr. Atherton and the four from Barton Cottage would have made a very respectable picnic-party without the distant neighbours who had been asked to join them, but Sir John delighted in numbers, and considered any gathering that consisted of less than twenty persons as lamentably small.

The party were to meet at noon, enjoy the cold viands that Lady Middleton provided, explore the ruins, and discuss the theatricals. Anyone who had any ideas on the subject was to produce them, and between them all something good would be decided.

Lady Middleton was to drive with the children and baskets, and Mr. Atherton was active in getting them seated in the carriage and the baskets handed him. Several small jokes passed between him and Annamaria, and William wished him to drive with them. Amidst much that was affected in him, his liking for children seemed as genuine as their affection for him, and Lady Middleton smiled on him with extreme graciousness. She had felt hitherto not the slightest inconvenience from the continued intimacy with the new incumbent, and now began to think him a positive acquisition. He watched the carriage start to overtake the main body, already on their way. Sir John escorted Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor, Margaret had the society of Mrs, Jennings and Miss Steele, which suited her very well, as they did all the necessary talking. Mr. Atherton found that Edward Ferrars had remained behind to walk with him.

It was natural that they should fall into some talk, some comparison of their parishes. Barton seemed to have the advantage in some ways. It was smaller. There was less visiting to be done among the poorer parishioners. The income was slightly larger, but it was annoying to find that the parsonage at Delaford did seem to be superior in size, and in extent of grounds, and that, though the Barton vicarage had been altered and improved, it did not appear that it was in any way equal. Mr. Atherton expressed some surprise at hearing of so fine a house, but added that he supposed Mrs. Edward Ferrars's fortune must be an assistance to her husband in maintaining such a style of living.

Edward was puzzled. Elinor's fortune was no more than the thousand pounds inherited from her grand-uncle, and he was at a loss to understand why it should be supposed to be considerable. He hesitated, remarked coldly that the Miss Dashwoods had not been wealthy, and began to talk of the best breeds of cattle. Mr. Atherton became more or less silent, that is, he replied when Edward asked questions, but originated nothing himself. He was thinking, and the sum of his thoughts was that the late rebuff might be all for the best. He did not feel much affection for Margaret if she were without fortune. He liked her very well, and admired her more than any other lady of his acquaintance, but he now felt quite satisfied with the turn affairs had taken. During that walk to the Priory, while discussing short-horns with Mr. Ferrars, he finally withdrew his pretensions to Margaret's hand.

Meanwhile, Margaret, unaware of her loss, walked beside Mrs, Jennings and heard the flow of joking and laughter which she kept up with Miss Steele, and thought of something quite different.

The Careys had arrived at the Priory before them, but nothing could be done about unpacking the baskets till the Whitakers should be there. The time must be spent in exploring the ruins, and strolling about in twos and threes. Margaret was easily induced by Walter Carey to climb the remains of an old tower, and from thence to obtain a fine view of the country. It was a delightful exercise with just enough of effort and danger to make it entertaining, and to make his steadying hand acceptable. She enjoyed the small adventure, and found Walter an agreeable companion. He was just returned home from Oxford, was well-read and sufficiently talkative, and added the advantage of an agreeable person to those of an easy manner and an intelligent mind. They returned to the main party well pleased with themselves and with each other.

The party were now collected. Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker and Mrs. Jennings seemed to find great pleasure in meeting, and were settled with Mrs. Dashwood on a bank sheltered from the breeze by a corner of ancient wall. Lady Middleton overlooked the unpacking of the baskets, which was being

done by Elinor and Isabella Carey, while Penelope Carey and Mary Whitaker carried round the trays of cakes and glasses. Sir John was joking with Miss Steele, and cutting up veal pies, and Henry Whitaker handed plates.

Mr. Atherton had arranged the children round a fallen stone as table with the Careys' governess at one end, and himself at the other, and had piled the table with the good things. This looked the most cheerful corner, but Margaret was not invited to join them. Walter found a seat for her under an arch, and Edward strolled up to tell her that he supposed she knew that she looked very picturesque, like a saint in a window, or something of that sort. She was used to his brotherly teasing, and made some suitable replies at about the level of the wit that is usual at these gatherings, when no one says anything that they, or any others consider worth a second thought.

It was all very agreeable, and the rain held off surprisingly. Every one declared that they ate twice as much in the open air as they did at home, and wondered why they did not come here more often; and got rather sleepy, and then rather restless—and at last it must be time to go home.

"But this will never do," cried Sir John. " We have decided nothing about the play."

"How charming it would be if we could have it here!' exclaimed Isabella Carey. " What a background that fine Norman arch would be! Surely there is some play that would suit these surroundings?"

"Hamlet " and "' Macbeth " were suggested, but Sir John wanted something with more in it to amuse.

"How about 'The Taming of the Shrew' or that laughable play of Mr. Sheridan's, 'The Rivals' I think it's called, or 'The School of Rivals,' or something of the sort?"

These, however, were ruled out. Walter Carey was firm that a ruined church was not the right setting for them.

"Well, then, much better have it in the Park grounds!" said Sir John. "There is a nice open space not too far from the house, with trees and a flight of steps that would make a scene to suit anything."

A few drops of rain began to fall and Lady Middleton, in fear for her children catching cold, hurriedly suggested that all should return to the Park, look at the place Sir John described, and talk over all the details under cover. Wraps were hastily found, and the party set off with utmost expedition for the Park.

CHAPTER XIV

WALKING or driving, it was not long before the whole party reached the Park. The first half-hour was occupied in strolling about the grounds between two showers to make up their minds where the theatre should be. Several admirable spots were discovered, but no decision could be reached until every one came together again in the large drawing-room. Acting out of doors seemed a very imprudent scheme to some of the elders, but there was a strong body of optimists who held to the idea; and, as they were warmly supported by Sir John, a pastoral play it was to be.

"We had a pastoral play at Oxford last term, in Worcester Gardens," said Walter Carey. "We played 'Comus.'"

"'Comus'?" called out Sir John. "What's 'Comus'?"

"'Comus' is a masque," replied Walter.

"The very thing,' proclaimed Sir John. "There will be some fun about that! We will play 'Comus.' How many parts are there?"

Walter Carey was very willing for it to be 'Comus.' He thought he could play the leading role better than the man who had the part at Oxford, and at least would like the opportunity to try. Sir John's expectation of something funny might be inconvenient, but something to please him could no doubt be managed in the rout.

No one had anything to urge against 'Comus,' and for the same reason could say nothing in its favour. Excepting Walter, Margaret and Henry Whitaker, no one knew anything about it. However, Sir John's enthusiasm for the unknown carried the company along with him, and 'Comus' was unanimously chosen for the play.

The next thing was to decide the parts, and for this a copy of the play was desirable. It was feared by Sir John that Walter would have the only copy in the neighbourhood.

"Not at all, sir," replied Walter. "Surely there is a Milton in your library."

"Milton!'' said Sir John, his enthusiasm rather dashed, "I did not know it

was by Milton. I thought he only wrote long poems about the Garden of Eden?"

"Not at all, sir," again replied Walter. "He wrote some plays and political pamphlets as well —quite a secular writer in his way."

This reassured Sir John, and Margaret, who had made more use of the Park library than anyone else had ever done, offered to fetch the volume of Milton containing 'Comus,' and returned with a book no more dusty than might be expected considering it had been undisturbed for we know not how many years.

"You had better take the part you did before, Walter; it will save you the trouble of learning a new one," said Sir John.

Walter blushed and hesitated, and then admitted that he had been the Lady at Oxford and would prefer some other part.

"Mr. Carey had better be Comus," said Margaret. "It is by far the longest part, and he must already be familiar with the whole play, so could learn it easily."

Walter was grateful for this suggestion, and every one else was willing that he should have a long part to learn.

"Excellent," said Sir John. ''And you had better be stage-manager too, and put us all in the way of it. For, except for charades, I have never done anything of the sort. Just give me a part in which I can make some noise and get a few laughs out of the audience, and you can divide all the long speeches between you."

It was necessary to get the opinions of the rest of the party before going further. Miss Steele liked acting excessively, but never could remember her words. Lady Middleton stipulated only that there should be parts for William and dear little Annamaria, and of course for John, as they would be inconsolable if they were not included. Henry Whitaker looked urgent, hoping he would not be left out, but said nothing, and the young ladies all thought one of the others should be the heroine. Edward Ferrars was applied to, but said he did not think acting suited to the dignity of the cloth, and Mr. Atherton replied that he would like to be employed as prompter.

Elinor Ferrars said decisively that she wished to be one of the audience.

Walter found himself expected to allot parts to five ladies, five children counting his own little sisters, Sir John, Henry and himself, and to give pleasure to all of them in doing so. It was an anxious half-hour for the young man, but he came through it with creditable success, though his opening words were not auspicious. He had to announce that there were only two parts for the ladies, the Lady and Sabrina. He began by suggesting that Margaret should be the Lady, Miss Steele bridled, but the two Miss Careys and Miss Whitaker united in acclaiming this choice, though Isabella Carey's face lengthened and Miss Whitaker appeared surprised. Margaret, however, would not consent. If Mr. Walter Carey was to be Comus, it would be best that one of his sisters should be the Lady. They would have many opportunities for rehearsal, and both parts were so long that much study together would be necessary. Margaret thought that Isabella should be the Lady. She had a singing voice, and the song was of importance. It was clear that no one else could be so suitable for the part. Miss Carey was well content to have it so, and her modest objections were soon talked down, the more easily as she really thought herself well suited to the part.

There were now four young ladies, and the part of Sabrina among them. Walter's hesitation was excusable, but again Margaret came to his help.

"I have been thinking," she said, "that the parts of the Brothers could very well be taken by ladies. Some long mantle worn thrown over the shoulder would make a handsome appearance, and be a suitable dress, and they were both represented as very young. The line, 'As smooth as Hebe's their unrazor'd lips,' seems to fit very well."'

There was general laughter and a brightening of eyes and renewed hope among the ladies, though poor Henry Whitaker looked as though his last chance were gone. Walter quickly decided that his younger sister and Miss Whitaker, who were both taller than Margaret, should be the Brothers, unless Miss Steele——?

But Miss Steele was horrified at the idea. She to take a man's part indeed! Not for the world would she be so bold! No, Sabrina would do very well

for her!

There was a silence. Walter was again in a dilemma. This time it was Henry who gave help.

"Sabrina has got to sing. I know, because we did 'Comus' at school last half. Can you sing, Miss Steele?"

Miss Steele could not, but suggested that some one might sing behind the scenes for her. There was again silence, interrupted by a cough from Sir John, which reminded Walter that a part had to be found for him.

"What would you like, Sir John? Will you be Comus?" he asked with an heroic effort. "Or would you like to lead the rout? I think Henry must be the attendant Spirit. It is a long part, and he knows the play."

Henry's anxious look changed to one of bashful happiness, Sir John had an easy method of coming to a decision.

"Which has most to say—Comus or the rout fellow ?" he asked.

"Well, actually Comus has a considerable number of lines to say—some hundred—but of course we shall have to cut the whole thing down somewhat. Still, Comus has undoubtedly got a good deal to say. The leader of the rout has—well, he must make as much noise as possible and dance about. It is a very active part."

"I never could learn poetry. I will lead the rout," Sir John decided to the general satisfaction, and he added a grace to his decision by asking Miss Nancy to lead the rout with him, as she did not like learning poetry either, and was so fond of dancing.

Miss Steele reddened and hesitated, but Miss Carey's suggestion that the members of the rout should all be very gaily clad, in contrast to the rest of the company, who must be in white or sad colouring, decided the point. Miss Steele would be a prominent figure in the rout, and the part of Sabrina was left for Margaret, who could sing and did not mind wearing plain white.

The children, three Middletons and two Careys, were to be inferior members of the rout, and all was now happily arranged except the music. At first it was thought that the music must come from within doors, but

Penelope Carey luckily remembered that her sisters' governess could play the harp reasonably well, and was a very good sort of girl. It was decided that she should be established behind some shrub and contribute all the music necessary.

CHAPTER XV

THE next days were productive of constant bustle and amusement for the actors, even if others of the party felt only boredom and inconvenience. Elinor was against the whole scheme. It was taking up time which could have been more rationally employed. The performance was sure to be inferior, and the weather would probably be bad. The gentlemen were all too busy to fish with Edward, and she herself was pressed into service to help with the arrangement of the dresses. They had come to Barton hoping for some rest and refreshment, and found themselves in all this turmoil. It was true that there was no one at liberty to entertain Edward Ferrars, and it was fortunate that he was much more fond of his own society than that of any other creature with the exception of his wife, and possibly of his brother-in-law, Colonel Brandon, so did not feel this to be an evil. His stay at Barton must necessarily be short. He had only arranged for his duty to be taken for one Sunday, and he must return to his parish. Elinor was to stay on. This had not been part of the original plan, but there were several reasons for the decision. Young Master Ferrars was safely established at the mansion-house at Delaford under the care of Marianne and the nurse who attended to Master Brandon. Edward himself wished his wife to have the pleasure of a longer stay with her mother. Elinor was convinced that she could be of use at Barton in discouraging in Mrs. Dashwood any inclination to take a romantic view of Commander Pennington's advances. She was not without hope of exercising a wise influence on Margaret. Edward was very much against her attempting any such thing, and gave it as his opinion that no good came of interference; but Elinor would not allow that wise suggestion could be classed as interference, and she reminded Edward that he himself had experienced the folly and misery of a premature love affair. All of which was moderately convincing to Edward, and entirely so to Elinor herself. She would stay on till the early days of September, for Sir John Middleton was then to join Colonel Brandon at

Delaford for some shooting, and would take her in his carriage all the way. Margaret was glad that her mother had her sister's company while she herself was so much engaged with the theatricals, and did not connect her prolonged visit with any of her own hopes or desires.

In addition to the pleasure of having Elinor with her, Mrs. Dashwood was very well amused by the theatricals. Margaret brought her so entertaining a description of all that went on that to the pleasure of listening to a lively recital was added the happiness of hoping that the impression made by Commander Pennington on Margaret's mind was fast fading away. She looked so happy and cheerful that it was reasonable to suppose her heart-free. It was not in Mrs. Dashwood's nature to fear when it was possible to hope.

Margaret was, in fact, enjoying the theatricals excessively. It was essential to her happiness at present to have every moment of the day occupied. Thinking did not suit her at all. Too soon thinking gave way to longing, and longing to unreasonable fears. She was better employed in learning her lines, practising her song, making her dress and helping the other members of the party to do the same. She had not a long part herself, and for this reason she was in constant demand to hear others recite theirs. The offer to hear hers in return could always be made, with small risk of acceptance. Walter Carey in particular found no one so kind and inspiring.

Sir John and Miss Steele had no concern but their dresses, which were to be as gay and fantastic as possible, and the five children had to be fitted with masks and taught some sort of order in their disorderly rout, that they might not hurt themselves or each other.

Walter was a careless stage-manager, inclined to think that everything would settle itself, and that the chief parts were all that concerned him. But, if the play was to be anything but an absurdity, these minor matters must receive attention, and there was no one so suited for the task or so willing to be employed as Margaret. In everything she was ably assisted by the Careys' governess, Miss Fairfield, who had her own little charges well in hand, and through them was able to exercise some sort of control over the

little Middletons, who were constantly surprising themselves by doing what they were told.

Lady Middleton was concerned as to who should and who should not be asked to view the performance—the task of selection being made no easier by Sir John inviting every one he met—and also as to what should be the nature of the refreshment to be provided. She could not be satisfied with anything short of complete elegance, and, on asking Walter Carey how this had been managed at Oxford, was disgusted to hear that he thought there had been something handed round. Perhaps some beer or cider. He was not sure!

Mrs. Jennings thought it all rather tedious. She could not find that there was a word of love in the play from beginning to end. It was all long speeches and brothers going about after their sister. Such foolishness! The speeches had been severely cut down, they said, but they were still a great deal too long to her mind, and not what anyone would say. Very different from Mr. Sheridan's plays, where you could think it was yourself talking half the time! She thought they would all have enjoyed a few balls and picnics much more than all this solemn saying of poetry over to each other in corners. She had given her old red satin to Nancy Steele to make a good appearance in the rout, but beyond that she could not find anything to do to help, and she thought they had best get on without her. She would sit by Mrs. Ferrars in the audience and quiz them all with her and Mrs. Dashwood.

Perhaps the children were more completely happy than anyone. Their part was just to make a noise and wear queer dresses, and, if children cannot be pleased with that, they are very strange children indeed, and, though Lady Middleton might believe hers to be exceptional, they proved themselves in this to be very like the little Careys.

As to the rest of the company, the Lady and Comus were thoroughly pleased with their own parts, though often despondent about the others. The Brothers were sometimes assailed by doubts. Did they, in fact, look as much like two young men as they hoped? Henry Whitaker found his part of

attendant Spirit very hard stuff to learn, Sir John occasionally had a hankering after the part of Comus, who had some very good things to say, and Miss Nancy Steele was not always sure that even wearing red satin made a member of the rout one of the principal figures in the play.

Margaret's task was to encourage all these, to keep some control over the rout, to advise the Careys' governess as to the music, and to be sure that Mr. Atherton had his prompter's copy correctly marked with cuts and pauses.

CHAPTER XVI

THE rehearsals were the perquisite of Sir John. It was at the Park that they were held. His drawing-room it was that was daily filled with guests; his servants that were daily called upon to provide casual meals; and his box-rooms and cupboards that were ransacked for stage properties. A very happy state of things for Sir John, who could never be too much in company, but less agreeable to his lady, who liked her household arrangements to move smoothly, and not to progress in jerks and runs.

Sir Francis and Lady Carey began to feel that their young people were accepting hospitality for which no return was being made. Though not fond of company themselves, this situation was not agreeable to them. They decided that some effort must be made, and the result of their consultation was that Walter Carey rode over to Barton on Sunday afternoon, commissioned by his mother to invite the party to Newton for the following day. There was to be a rehearsal in the morning; the whole party was to dine, and after tea more neighbours were to come in for a ball. It was to be a day of festivity, and Walter Carey looked as if he expected to enjoy it.

Elinor was at first inclined to excuse herself and to declare herself unable to leave her mother, but Walter immediately included Mrs. Dashwood in the invitation, and, though she laughingly declined on her own behalf, she was determined that Elinor should be of the party. It was just such a gathering as a young woman should enjoy, and Elinor could not be excused from enjoying it. She had been to many such parties at her mother's instigation, and been exceedingly weary at them, and was really reluctant, but Walter's smile carried the day and she consented to be made happy, so far as being continually in company for a space of twelve hours could make her so.

Walter rode off to secure other guests, brimful of pleasure himself and leaving a very fair amount behind him. The project would be an agreeable change to Margaret. Sir Francis and Lady Carey were superior in sense and

taste to the Middletons, and, even had they been without these claims to her interest, they had at least the quality of being less well known. Every one must feel that a party was the pleasanter for Walter's presence, and it was four years since she had been to Newton Hall. They were to be called for early by the Barton Park carriage.

The morning was fine, and they started for the drive of four miles in excellent spirits. Mr. Atherton joined them, and the barouche was full; Sir John driving with the manservant beside him, and Elinor, Miss Steele and Margaret sharing Mr. Atherton's attentions between them. Lady Middleton had thought the day too long for the children, and stayed at home herself to be with them.

The drive through deep Devonshire lanes was a very pretty one, and all were delighted with the charm of the journey, and even more delighted to have it over, to judge by the pleasure expressed when they came in sight of the house, a fine Tudor mansion, with walled gardens, fish-ponds and wild shrubbery, all very much like many other country gentlemen's seats, but not the less deserving of admiration on that account.

Walter Carey met them with enthusiasm, and Sir Francis with cordiality. It was to be the last before the dress-rehearsal, and Sir Francis was to be admitted as audience and critic, and, if Lady Carey could find time from her preparations for the evening, it was hoped that her opinion would be obtained too, though privately this was not considered to be of equal importance.

That the rout would only consist of four in place of seven noisy people was to be deplored, but much was said on the wisdom of avoiding excitement for children, and much was thought on the comfort of the young Middletons being absent from the party. It was hoped aloud that the four would be unruly and noisy enough for seven when the proper time came, but remembered in silence that the Middleton children had no idea of any time being unsuitable for noise and disturbance.

Mr. Atherton greeted his friends, the Carey children, with affection, and was dragged off at once to see the fish-ponds, Miss Fairfield going also to

see that the little girls did not presume on his good nature.

The rest of the party were conducted indoors for rest and refreshment. Lady Carey, though not so anxious for elegance as Lady Middleton, kept an uncommonly good table, and the repast that awaited them of fruit, cakes and excellent home-made ginger wine was enjoyed without any demur as to the earliness of the hour. Mary and Henry Whitaker arrived on horseback, with their evening clothes packed in the saddle-bags, and everybody was ready for the rehearsal.

Sir Francis was accommodated with an armchair in the middle of the lawn, as sole audience, and the rest of the party went behind the bushes in order to make their entrances as much a surprise to Sir Francis as was possible. Elinor had offered her services to Lady Carey, and was within doors with her, helping in some of the preparations for the evening, which could not but be a strain on the best ordered house and the best trained servants.

The attendant Spirit had said some of his curtailed speeches, rather bashful at being the first to speak, and feeling sharply the incongruity of his riding-boots, when Sir Francis rose from his chair with a shout of welcome.

"Willoughby! On my life! What brings you here?"

Willoughby was coming across the lawn with his usual easy manner of being sure of a welcome wherever he might appear.

"I heard you had something of this sort going on, Sir Francis, and you know my passion for acting. We are staying at Allenham, so I came over to see if I could be of any use."

The rout were being held in leash by Sir John, and Walter was looking round the bushes to see what the interruption was about, and Margaret, from her bush, peeped too. Walter, of course, knew nothing except that this tiresome fellow was interrupting the rehearsal, but Margaret was highly entertained. The meeting between Willoughby and Elinor employed her thoughts to the exclusion of all else. Just what degree of cold dignity would Elinor assume? This was an audacity of which few but Willoughby would be capable, but it formed a situation that had at least the merit of being worthy of observation.

Willoughby was given a chair, and his presence no doubt added zest to the acting. Walter was determined to make a good show before this older man, who was yet of his own generation. The Lady was more graceful, the Brothers more dashing, and the rout, if possible, more noisy than heretofore. Miss Steele especially surpassed herself in the spirit and vigour of her dancing, and Sir John was much gratified by Willoughby's incessant laughter.

When all was over Sir John came to shake hands and be congratulated.

"Funny piece, isn't it? That bit where we all come tumbling in ought to amuse our audience. I like to see a man laugh as you do. Shows a good heart !"

"I have been vastly entertained, Sir John," replied Willoughby with a bow, and then, as Walter came up, he turned his compliments with a finer edge, congratulating the younger man on the fine speaking of the lines which the whole company achieved.

"Miss Margaret's song is delicious. A most melodious voice, like her sister's but not so full and sweet. Mrs. Brandon had the voice of an angel, unequalled in tone and expression."

He spoke with great feeling, sighed heavily, and looked downcast.

This had the desired effect, for as they walked to the house Walter Carey said in an undertone to Margaret:

"I suppose he was in love with your sister, Mrs. Brandon. I pity him. It must have been bad to him to see her married. I wonder why she would not have him?"

Margaret made no reply, but thought with amusement how Willoughby had improved his position with those few words. He would now be regarded as the unsuccessful lover of Marianne, who would appear to have turned from the young admirer and married the rich, middle-aged suitor. Willoughby was to be pitied, but not to be blamed, Marianne to be wondered at, but not to be pitied. Perhaps both gained something by this re-arrangement of the facts.

They had now reached the house, and Margaret hoped to be in time to

witness the meeting between Elinor and Willoughby. She was not to be disappointed. Lady Carey and Elinor were still upstairs when the rest of the party assembled in the drawing-room before dinner. Lady Carey appeared, greeted Willoughby as the last-come guest, and then made her stout, comfortable way to Sir John Middleton, who was to tell her how everything had gone at the rehearsal and all about the ducks and geese at Barton Park, and the prospects of a good fruit harvest—for Lady Carey was a real country dame, and a much better pair to Sir John than his more elegant lady-wife, at least in Margaret's opinion. But then Sir Francis Carey, a fine scholarly gentleman, would have found Lady Middleton very fatiguing, so the re-arrangement of these pairs was abandoned by Margaret, and she continued to watch the door for Elinor.

She came. At sight of Willoughby her complexion changed. He came forward eagerly smiling, and with outstretched hand. She bowed decisively, managed to ignore the hand, and turned to Isabella Carey with some question about the rehearsal. Willoughby hesitated. Margaret saw him falter, but imagined him to be taking courage. With resolution he joined the group, and himself entered into conversation with Miss Carey, including Elinor in his remarks with courtesy and friendliness. He held her there with his attentions, would not allow her to escape him, and for a few minutes it appeared to all who cared to take note of it that Mr. Willoughby and Mrs. Ferrars were on terms of the friendliest acquaintance.

Elinor was determined to get away, and move away she did, but not till his purpose was accomplished, and Margaret was left in admiration of his ready wit and charming effrontery. She saw that her sister's resentment was great. It was but natural that Elinor, who knew so much of the suffering Willoughby had caused to Marianne, should feel strongly in condemnation of this easy assumption of friendliness.

Margaret felt that she herself judged the case more correctly. She felt she knew more of his real feeling, his real regret, and she could not be blind to the fact that the line he was taking was really the one to do most honour to Marianne's situation. If it pleased him to pose as the unfortunate admirer it

was an indulgence which need not be denied him except in the interest of strict veracity, for, while it might seem that he gained somewhat in the eyes of the world in being thought unlucky rather than faithless, Marianne gained more in being supposed fickle rather than unfortunate. For it is well known that while to be crossed in love is highly honourable to a gentleman, in a lady it is correspondingly disgraceful; and while a change of heart is much to be deplored in a masculine lover, for a female to hesitate between two, and finally make her choice, enhances not only her own value but that of both her admirers; so that Colonel Brandon might be supposed to be a gainer by Willoughby's affectation of love-lornity; and would doubtless be much gratified by the circumstances if it could be supposed that he would think anything at alt about it.

CHAPTER XVII

THE party for dinner was to have consisted of fifteen persons, including the little girls and their governess. Lady Carey, who combined strict views on the bringing up of children with the greatest latitude and kindness in carrying them out, had arranged that the school-room party should sit at a side-table, but partake of all the good things provided for their betters. Willoughby's arrival threw the numbers out and, in order to avoid the evil of sitting down thirteen at the larger table, it was necessary that some one else should be placed at the inferior one, and Lady Carey had decided that it should be Henry Whitaker, who was still at Westminster, and therefore grouped in her mind with the children.

The choice could not have fallen on anyone who would feel the indignity more. He stood beside his chair, red and glowering, unwilling to take the place one moment before it was necessary. The disgrace was happily averted. The two little girls clamorously begged that Mr. Atherton might be sent to their table and, as he added his entreaties, Lady Carey yielded to their wishes. Margaret breathed again for Henry, and as he took the place intended for Mr. Atherton between their hostess and herself she was able to begin the process of soothing his ruffled feelings by the sweetness of her welcoming smile.

It was not to be expected that Henry could have much to say to Lady Carey. The affront was too recent, and his resentment too just. It was not until the first course had been removed and the corner dishes placed for the second that he could have replied without constraint even to her inquiries for his mother. Margaret's attention, as he told her of the great doings at Westminster at the Grease, and the wild scenes in Great School that always ensued, had done him a world of good, and, though it might be that Lady Carey would never be entirely forgiven, he found he could now speak to her in an ordinary tone and believe her to be a very good sort of woman in her way.

Walter Carey, who sat on Margaret's other side, was far from being pleased to find her attention turned from him, but, in addition to his habitual good-nature, he had the assistance of knowing himself to be the superior of Henry in so many particulars that he felt he could afford to him the indulgence of Margaret's kindness. He himself was obliged to turn to Mary Whitaker, a plain girl, but, he found, very agreeable. So often it may be noticed by those whose powers of observation are not blurred by partiality that the absence of other attractions is accompanied by a wish to please, and some knowledge of how to do it, so that those who are so justly scorned for their lack of beauty, by their fairer sisters, achieve a high degree of popularity with the other sex.

Mary Whitaker was generally liked and always content with such notice as fell to her share. She felt no resentment when Walter took the opportunity of the dishes being changed to engage Margaret's attention, even though she herself was cut short in the middle of a sentence, and, finding Mrs. Ferrars at liberty, was pleased to find herself kindly addressed and offered some advice and help in the arrangement of her dress as Second Brother.

Sir Francis had enjoyed his talk with Elinor. Her cultivated mind and elegant beauty exactly suited his taste, and he eyed Miss Steele, who sat on his left, with a sidelong glance that spoke his fear that he was now to be less happily entertained. Miss Steele was in very poor spirits. She was sat down next to Sir Francis, who had not so much as looked at her, and on the other side was Penelope Carey, who had no eyes for anyone but Mr. Willoughby, and who seemed a stupid sort of girl even if she had tried to make herself agreeable. When Sir Francis had learnt that Miss Steele had lived at Plymouth all her life, and that her younger sister was well married, but that she herself could not make up her mind, he found himself at a loss for a topic of conversation, and, on being applied to by Elinor for information as to the origin of Comus, he gladly devoted himself to the task of enlightening the minds of Mary Whitaker and Mrs. Ferrars on the subject of the influence of the Elizabethans on literature of a later date.

Willoughby had been exerting his powers of conversation between Isabella

and Penelope Carey, who had often wished to know more of him in the days when Marianne had absorbed his attention, and by the end of dinner they were both quite convinced that whatever the trouble had been, whatever it was that had broken the engagement, it must have been the fault of Mrs. Brandon, and not of the charming gentleman who entertained them. They wondered that his wife were not more seen with him. They feared he was neglected by her, and remembered all they had heard of her ill-temper and sickliness.

Isabella's attention was claimed from time to time by Sir John, who must have some young lady to tease about her dearest affections, and who spent a very agreeable hour dividing his attentions between Lady Carey, who was a very knowledgable woman indeed, and Isabella, who was a very handsome one.

The party at the smaller table was as noisy as any. Mr. Atherton had claimed that Miss Fairfield was to have a holiday and he would be deputy governess, with the lady as his eldest and show pupil, and the little girls had been delighted to have their knuckles rapped and their elbows poked in, and to be told how to hold their forks all wrong, and which side of their mouths they should use for drinking.

The laughter became so uproarious that Sir Francis's eyebrows went up into his grey hair, and Lady Carey had to administer some more serious admonitions. Margaret thought with surprise of how wearisome this man could be, and made the well-worn discovery that if people are to be agreeable they need but be natural. Mr. Atherton's good-nature was superior to his intelligence, and he could make himself liked where he did not much wish to impress.

Dinner was over at last, and the ladies were to spend the hours before tea in rest and chat in the drawing-room, admiring each other's work, for which they cared nothing, playing each other's songs, which they did very indifferently, and preventing each other from indulging in the quiet doze which would have been so welcome to most after the tiring morning and excellent dinner. Lady Carey alone was fortunate in having matters

requiring her attention, and which, declining all assistance, she executed in great comfort with her eyes closed on the couch in her bed-chamber.

The party in the drawing-room finally strolled out on to the lawn, where they were joined by the gentlemen, who had been watching a desultory game of billiards between Walter and Willoughby. Henry felt that the insult of the dining-room had been almost wiped out when Sir Francis had invited him to join the party in the billiard-room.

The children were taken off to the school-room by their governess. Their share of amusement was over for the day, as they were not to appear at the ball. If they felt downcast at being excluded from the fun, they could console themselves by thinking that, in a few years time, they would be as pretty as Miss Dashwood, and talk as fast as Miss Steele, and wear clothes as fine as their sisters.

Miss Fairfield had no such consolation. For a young woman of twenty-three to be in the schoolroom while a ball is in progress in the drawing-room is no happy fate; and the time to which the children looked forward would only be to her the occasion of a removal to another house, where she might be treated with less consideration, and at a time when she could not but be losing the attractions of face and figure which seemed so wasted now. She actually was as pretty as Margaret, and could have found as many things to say as Miss Steele, and have looked fully as well in fine clothes as the two Miss Careys. Her lot, however, was a different one, and she took the cover from her harp in order to practice the music of the other girls' songs, with the wish at least to be contented m that she had a share, though a small one, in the performance which was the centre of every one's thoughts.

CHAPTER XVIII

ELINOR seated herself on a bench under a tree with Mary Whitaker, who was seeking her society with the enthusiasm of the very young for an elder whose notice is coveted. Elinor enjoyed the admiration, and could gratify her sense of right by leading the conversation on lines likely to be helpful in the development of Mary's mind. It was not in Elinor's nature to enjoy anything fully unless she could perceive in it some vestige of a duty; here duty and pleasure were combined.

The rest of the party were pacing up and down the avenue behind them in twos and threes, and scraps of their conversation were wafted to Elinor's ears and mingled with Mary's artless admiration in her mind.

"A capital fellow, Willoughby! He has got a dull little wife with a fortune. I suppose one makes up for the other, but in my opinion he was better off without either. When you marry, Miss Isabella, take care you get a fine young man, and a little fortune too, and ask me over to dance at your wedding. An old fellow like me——"

Sir John's voice grew fainter, and Elinor's attention was recalled by the eager questioning of Mary as to the relative merits of Gainsborough and Sir Thomas Lawrence's portraits, a subject on which Elinor's opinion must be conclusive, as she drew very pretty pencil sketches herself and had been to London. Another pair was approaching.

"There's a table up School with all sorts of fellow's names cut on it—deep too. I. Mean to cut mine before I leave if I get chance. I found my grandfather's name, and two of my uncles'. Did you cut your name anywhere up in Canterbury, Mr. Atherton—?"

"That's Harry," said Mary. "He is always talking about Westminster. I do think it is rather hard that he should go to London twice a year and I, who am older, have never been there. Do not you think so, Mrs. Ferrars? He says I should not like to be at Westminster at all, but I think it must be better than to be always in the country. Do not you think so, Mrs. Ferrars?"

Miss Steele's voice could not be heard from far away, and her complaints made Elinor smile, and Mary redden with vexation on her behalf.

"My sister, Lucy, married Mr. Robert Ferrars, so Mrs. Ferrars and me are almost sisters; but then she is so cold and distant I do not like to claim it, and indeed I am not sure that Lucy would wish it, for the family thought it a very bad match for Mr. Edward, and they all look down on his wife, so of course Lucy does too, as she is one of them. Mrs. Ferrars, his mother, cannot forgive Mr. Edward for making the marriage; for all that she is so fond of Lucy, so it's not that she is unkind and proud. But then Lucy has a way with her and I am sure will take any trouble to get herself liked, and it's that makes the difference, Miss Penelope, you may be sure for I always will say Lucy is very nice when she isn't being cross, and I miss her very much, for she always knew what suited me better than I do myself. Sisters are——"

Neither Elinor nor Mary wished to hear more, and were satisfied that the misdeeds of sisters should be lamented out of ear-shot. Mary's questions began again, and Elinor was delighting in talking of her favourite painters when she stopped in surprise on hearing the voices of the next party.

Willoughby, Margaret and Walter Carey were approaching. She could hear Willoughby's pleasant tones recounting some theatrical experience of his own, Walter's eager voice questioning him, submitting to his judgment, consulting him, and Margaret's low laughter and interested comments. Every one making much of Willoughby, reinstating him, admiring him! Elinor remembered that she herself had not repulsed him on the night of Marianne's illness; but then he had been anxious, distraught, miserable. Common humanity demanded that she should bear with him! Now, when he was at ease, self-satisfied, arrogant, it was not to be endured that Margaret should help him in maintaining this good opinion of himself.

The conversation had begun at the other end of the avenue by Willoughby taking Walter's arm as he strolled with Margaret under the trees.

"I hear you have had a friend of mine in the neighbourhood—a naval officer—Commander Pennington. Did you see him, Carey ? "

Walter denied all knowledge of Commander Pennington, and Margaret did not claim any.

"He was at Grice's farm for about a week, and I was at Allenham all the while, which makes it all the more annoying. However, I hear he left word with Mrs. Grice that he would be back in October at the latest; so I shall contrive to be here then, if I can get Mrs. Smith to think she cannot do without me."

"How do you know him?" asked Walter, to Margaret's relief. She feared she might put the question herself if Walter failed in curiosity.

"I met him in London playing cards at my club first, and sometimes since, and once at Lord Courtland's private theatre. We were not acting, either of us. Merely members of the audience, and prodigiously bored at that. They did 'Five Hours at Brighton,' and it would not have surprised me to hear that it was ten times as long. Pennington and I got into a quiet corner where we could sit down and talk of something else. Before all things private theatricals should not be too long! Your choice of a play is a capital one, Carey. Indeed you are much to be congratulated on play and players."

From thence the conversation had drifted on to the point when Elinor could hear them talking and laughing, and for the moment forgot Mary Whitaker and her thirst for improvement in her anger against Willoughby, and his desire for reconcilement.

Fortunately a move indoors for tea broke up the various parties, and after tea no time could be wasted in talking when there was all the business of dressing for the ball to be attended to. Mary and Henry Whitaker were to stay the night, and their rooms were available as dressing-rooms for the rest of the party, the ladies running in and out of Mary's room and that of the Miss Careys for ribbons and hair-pins, shoe-ties and perfume; while the gentlemen brushed and combed, talked and laughed in Henry's room as much as in Walter's, and made him very happy in playing host to all these grown-up males to the extent at least of lending them his brushes and having their coats laid on his bed.

Downstairs there was consternation. The musicians had not arrived. There

was to be a fiddle and a cornet, and neither was come. Lady Carey's desperation was pitiable. Her round, happy face was ill-suited to such looks of woe, and Sir Francis, meeting her on the stairs, was disturbed out of his usual detachment. He was made acquainted with the cause of her distress, and, with that spark of genius in mundane affairs which is sometimes shown by those who spend their lives aloof from them, he suggested that Miss Fairfield could play very nicely and no doubt knew some pretty dance music.

Lady Carey's relief was in proportion to her former despair. She hurried along to the schoolroom door with the speed of one of her own children, and there found Miss Fairfield practicing her harp all alone. A few minutes sufficed to make known to her the trouble she was called upon to allay, and being, as Miss Penelope had said, a very good sort of girl, she was ready to put on her prettiest gown and take her subordinate but all-important part in the enjoyment of the evening.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ball was to begin and end early. The dancers came from distances of from three to four miles, and the journey home, though in moonlight, must be regarded. There were to be eight or ten couples. Fivemore ladies were expected and three more gentlemen. It was feared that Sir Francis would not dance, so unless the ladies could be persuaded to be so good as to stand up together there would only be a set of eight couples. Willoughby, in pursuance of his method of daring all, applied to Elinor for the honour of her hand for the first two dances. He fully deserved the reply he received, that Mary Whitaker was to be her partner. Mary, who had not heard of this arrangement before, was fortunately disengaged and, as she had no hope of being asked at first by Walter Carey, was quite ready to be one of the ladies who were applauded for their good-nature. Willoughby next made application to Margaret, who accepted. Neither Walter nor Henry had been quick enough, and were obliged to content themselves with her promise for later in the evening.

Willoughby did not again approach Mrs. Ferrars. He was satisfied at opening the ball with the sought-after Miss Margaret Dashwood, and after that devoted himself for the rest of the evening to the Miss Careys and the more attractive of their friends.

Margaret found much to enjoy in the first two dances. Willoughby was an accomplished dancer, and she was spared all the anxiety and shame which an indifferent partner can inflict, and which she had to endure with Walter Carey, who, though anxious to excel, was too fond of talking to attend to the dancing, and too fond of dancing to attend to the music. It was a lamentable performance, and Margaret looked forward with dread to the next two dances, which had been claimed by Henry Whitaker.

It might be argued that, if we could go through life dreading enough things, we should never have a moment of real distress, so uniformly is it the case that things dreaded turn out better than could be hoped. Henry was

a capital dancer, attending to his business with a steady gravity, and not to be turned from the right path by any mistakes that others, who should have known better, might make.

There was now a pause in the evening's gaiety, and a general move to the dining-room where supper was laid. Margaret found herself placed at table by Mr. Atherton, who having remarked on the excellence of the floor, the decorations and the supper, went on to comment on the excellence of the music.

"Miss Fairfield is a very fine performer. Do you not think it remarkable, Miss Margaret, that she does not tire of playing all these country-dances ? "

"Perhaps she is tired," said Margaret. "It seems hard that she should play for us to dance. I might play the next after supper I think; but that would be useless unless she got a partner, and with so many ladies. What do you say, Mr. Atherton, will you engage her to dance with you if I offer to play?"

Mr. Atherton agreed at once.

"That is very good of you," she said. ''When we are again in the drawing-room I will ask her to let me take her place at the instrument, and do you be on the watch, and come up at once when you see her prepared to dance. She must not know that we have spoken of it."

Mr. Atherton professed himself very happy, and the plan so neatly arranged was carried out to perfection, Miss Fairfield danced as well as she played, and Mr. Atherton beamed with good-nature and satisfaction with his lady and himself.

Margaret's last partner was an unexpected one. Sir Francis had been watching the dancers from the doorway with an air of amused toleration. He now approached her, professing himself able to get through Sir Roger de Coverley if carefully instructed, and offered himself for her tuition. She felt that it was to Elinor that the compliment was due, and was astounded at its being made to herself. She found him more au fait with the dance than he had professed. His bows were more courtly, his style of dancing more deliberate than was customary, but he made no mistakes and required no reminding. Walter Carey, who was dancing with Mary Whitaker, eyed his

father from time to time with an affectionate smile, but Margaret was unable to determine whether he was amused or pleased with the elder man's activity.

Elinor had danced only with Mary, Sir John and Mr. Atherton. She had sat down after supper, holding a desultory conversation with Lady Carey, who was sick to death of all of them, and longing for the first carriage to be announced. Elinor herself was too tired to talk, and they sat together, thankful for each other's intermittent silence.

Sir John's manservant at length brought the carriage to the door, and the hour of release had struck. Mr. Atherton was to stay the night with the vicar of Newton, and be driven over to Barton by the Careys in time for the dress-rehearsal on Wednesday. This had the result of leaving an inside seat in the carriage for Sir John, which proved to be an advantage for Elinor also. Hardly had they turned out of the drive gates before Sir John was asleep, and though Miss Steele would have chattered all the way home if she had been allowed, Elinor forbade all talking lest Sir John's slumbers should be disturbed. Whether solicitude for him were her only object, or whether she would have liked quiet herself, she was only partially successful, but Miss Steele did not talk above half the time, and hardly ever spoke or laughed really loud.

When Elinor and Margaret were put down at the gate of Barton Cottage and walked up the little path to the door, it seemed to both that they had been away something more like a week than a day. Their mother was awaiting them with inquiries as to their enjoyment and offers of soup or hot wine and water. The questions must be put aside until they themselves knew whether they had enjoyed the day. For the moment they only knew that they were exceedingly tired; but the hot wine was a welcome suggestion. Margaret was sufficiently restored by it to give her mother some account of the amusements of the day, but Elinor did not find that she would be able to do justice to her vexation with Margaret for her encouragement of Willoughby until she had had the further refreshment of a night's sleep.

No one, not even Lady Carey nor any of her household, was more glad than Elinor of the quiet comfort of her pillows. The dance music ceased at last to plague her brain, and she forgot her vexation and weariness in dreams of home and of young Master Ferrars.

CHAPTER XX

"I was very much surprised yesterday, mamma," began Mrs. Ferrars, when she and her mother met next morning at the breakfast table. "Mr. Willoughby was at Newton, and seemed to wish to renew our acquaintance. He has strange ideas of decorum. I was vexed that Margaret danced with him. In my opinion we should have nothing to say to him."

Mrs. Dashwood immediately asked to be made acquainted with all that had happened. Elinor's account was not too partial either to Willoughby or Margaret, but it was as accurate as a statement of the sort usually is, when a good deal more is felt than can be wisely expressed. Mrs. Dashwood's opinion was that there could be no help for it. They must admit Mr. Willoughby to their acquaintance or be for ever plagued by meeting him and being under the necessity of ignoring him. Both were evils, but Mrs. Dashwood had no difficulty in deciding on the least. They would meet him as an acquaintance. No doubt it would be as well to discourage Margaret from dancing or talking with him, and if possible they would give him the idea that he was but tolerated as being unworthy of serious resentment.

"After all," she said, ''he has done no harm to anyone but himself."

Elinor could not avoid a smile. Her recollections of Marianne's agony of mind, and her mother's misery at the time, were at variance with the present statement, but she could only envy and try to emulate such happy forgetfulness. In fact, Mrs. Dashwood was rather looking forward to meeting Mr. Willoughby again. There was something attractive in the thought that he was still attached to her daughter; it gave her an interest in him which she had never expected to feel again, and, though she could not think it right, she found it lessened rather than increased her blame of him. There could be no doubt that he would be present at the theatricals on Thursday. The dress-rehearsal was to be on Wednesday afternoon, and all were glad of a day's interval for rest and ordinary occupations. All Tuesday Margaret felt an increasing desire to lie down, but encouraged herself to her

usual activities, walked with Elinor, talked with her mother, and succeeded in concealing the fact of her weariness and malaise. The afternoon of Wednesday was damp and cold. The dress-rehearsal was achieved, as they so often are, in a series of pauses and rushes. Some people were not ready for their cues, and others came on too soon. The dresses needed alteration and the stage readjustment, It was over at last, and Margaret arrived home with wet feet and an aching head.

Mrs. Dashwood at once recommended bed, and her advice was thankfully accepted. It was soon clear to Elinor, and later to her mother, that Margaret was quite unfit to take her part on the morrow, and word to that effect was hastily sent to the Park.

Thomas was the messenger of woe. The Careys were all staying the night at the Park, and it was to Walter as stage-manager that the note was addressed, and by him read aloud to Sir John and Mr. Atherton in the library.

It was the misfortune to the play that chiefly affected Sir John, but Walter had a deeper concern in Margaret's illness. He was very young, but it has not been discovered that youth is any bar to falling in love, though it is often found to be an obstacle to marriage. He was for giving the play up altogether, and at once; or possibly postponing it, he added, when Sir John's crestfallen look suggested the amendment.

Mr. Atherton offered a suggestion of greater efficacy in removing the gloom from Sir John's good-natured face.

"Miss Fairfield knows the song," he said, "and has been present at every rehearsal. She would do the part very well or I am no judge of an actor."

All was well for Sir John. No thought of the suffering Margaret could be allowed to cloud his happiness. He carried the note into the drawing-room with an expression which bore no relation to his opening words.

"Here's bad news," he began. ' Miss Margaret ill in bed; but we do not need to give up our play, for Miss Fairfield can take the part. That is, if she will be so good," looking round the room for her. "She can do it just as well, Atherton says, and she is just about Miss Margaret's size, so can wear

the dress. I suppose she is in the schoolroom with the children. Let us go and tell her she is to be Sabrina."

Lady Middleton, however, insisted that she should first understand the matter, and then in a more formal manner advise Miss Fairfield of the happiness in store for her. She went herself, and having told Miss Fairfield of the misfortune begged her to be so kind as to assist them in their difficulty. For all the cold formality of her manner, the impression received was not different in essentials from that which Sir John would have given if he had had his way, and gone to tell her she "was to be Sabrina." Miss Fairfield, however, though well aware that she could not refuse, had not for that reason any wish to do so. She had not the least disinclination to oblige, and would much enjoy taking the part, and wearing the dress, and very soon was happily planning the arrangement of her " amber dropping hair."

Walter was soon on his way to the Cottage to inquire for Margaret, and to tell them how the difficulty was to be met. He found Mrs. Ferrars alone, as Mrs. Dashwood was in attendance on Margaret. He was very unhappy, and said so. Elinor remembered the visit of another anxious young man when Marianne was ill, and compared the two to the advantage of the one before her. Willoughby, ashamed and maddened by the sense of his unworthy conduct, dependent on his wife, and disgraced in many quarters. Walter, young, ardent, with only boyhood behind him, and happy prospects before, well liked, and the only son of a rich baronet. He made no attempt to hide his concern for Margaret, and the message with which he was charged, that Miss Fairfield would take the part, was only valuable to him as a possible alleviation to her mind. She must not trouble about the play. She must not trouble about anything. It would all be well arranged. All she had to do was to get well as quickly as was possible.

Elinor promised him that her sister should have every attention from her mother and herself, and at last he went away with something less of anxiety in his mind.

Margaret was feeling very ill. She had been exerting herself beyond her strength for some weeks, constantly keeping her mind at work to prevent

herself from thinking, and her body active to induce sleep at night. The long and exciting day on Monday had brought on a feverish attack, which was increased by the wet and discomfort of the rehearsal at the Park. Her voice had gone, her head ached, and she could not rest, although in bed. She had a wretched night of fitful dreams and fancies, but was better in the morning, and ready to urge her mother and Elinor to go to the Park in the afternoon to see the play.

Elinor had seen so much of it that she resolutely declined, but Mrs. Dashwood, with her lighter spirit, was not unwilling. She declared at first affectionately that she could not leave her Margaret when she was ill, but her Margaret protested that she very much wished to hear about the play, and that no one would give so good an account of it as her mother, and that she would do very well with Elinor at home. She charged her mother with many special points on which she was to be observant—to look out for the eccentricities of Miss Steele's dress, which Margaret had not attempted to restrain, to notice if the Brothers handled their swords well, if the children in the rout kept their stockings up, and whether the attendant Spirit forgot his words.

The morning passed quietly. The apothecary came and went, having ordered that she was on no account to leave her bed till all symptoms of fever had subsided. Margaret was not unwilling to rest her tired body. Her brain was still too feverish to think for long coherently, and she spent the day dozing and waking, tired and ill, but not unhappy.

A basket of fruit and flowers was brought from the Park by Walter with a particular hope embalmed in a formal little note from Lady Middleton that Miss Margaret went on well, and that Mrs. Dashwood and Mrs. Ferrars would be able to leave their patient in the afternoon and honour them at the Park.

Mrs. Dashwood would only consent to leave her daughter for the hour or so to be occupied by the play. The day was fine and she would walk up to the Park and walk back, without being included in those lesser festivities of reception and refreshment which had inevitably gathered round the

performance.

CHAPTER XXI

WILLOUGHBY had no difficulty in obtaining from Mrs. Grice the whereabouts of his “friend,” Richard Pennington. Consequently, when the letter-bag was opened on board the “Wren,” among other correspondence the following letter engaged the attention of the Commander:

ALLENHAM COURT,

August 5th, 1813.

DEAR PENNINGTON,

Imagine my chagrin on hearing you had been in my neighbourhood in April. My wife and I were staying at Allenham at the very time you were at Grice’s farm. A most annoying circumstance that I did not know you were there! I am here again, this time alone, for which I am duly grateful. Mrs. Smith has been unwell and wished to see me. I hear that you expect to be in England in October. Do, my dear friend, like a good fellow, come to me at Combe Magna. To be eternally shut up with one woman is more than any reasonable man can stand, and, although I get what society I can, none is more desired than yours. I cannot come here again unless I am summoned by the all-powerful Mrs. Smith. You know how she can keep me on a string. I have therefore no certainty of seeing you unless you will be compassionate.

Here nothing is thought of but a play in Sir John Middleton’s garden. Do you remember how we quizzed “Five Hundred Hours at Brighton”? This is just such another. Comus booming and mouthing, the Lady piping and squealing, and two girls standing about with their hands on their hips and calling each other “ Brother.” And then the rout. Ye gods! The rout! Sir John in purple, a middle-aged spinster in red, and about ten children in home-made masks. True it was “unruly,” and so far in accordance with the author’s intentions. The only relief was Sabrina, a very pretty young person indeed with plenty of fair hair and a good singing voice. The part was taken by her at the last, as Miss Margaret Dashwood was taken very ill the day

before. Young Walter Carey believes her to be dying, and is frantic with grief and anxiety, A touching spectacle! If she dies he will have to begin all over again with some one else, as he is the only son and the baronetcy must be carried on. Margaret is a sweet girl, though not the equal of her sister, Mrs. Brandon, but the gods defend me from the eldest sister, Mrs. Ferrars! How she came to be married no one knows! Was anyone ever better cut out to be an acid spinster? She blesses the home of the Reverend Edward Ferrars, who can hardly speak above a whisper and does not know one end of a gun from the other. The mother is an amiable woman enough.

Do, my dear Pennington, take pity on me and come and spend a week with me in the autumn, shooting my covers. I shall depend on your giving me your society. Till then I shall be prodigiously bored.

Your most attached

JOHN WILLOUGHBY.

Such was the account of the doings at Barton that travelled out to the Baltic, and was taken on board the "Wren." In the same letter-bag came out the orders from the Admiralty recalling the sloop of war. The " Wren" was to proceed to Portsmouth, where the crew would be discharged. Richard Pennington's gravity of demeanour was the subject of comment among the men. They would be glad to get on shore themselves, and see their homes and wives again, but the Commander looked as if the order for recall was bad news.

The theatricals met with more general approval than would be supposed from Willoughby's account: but as with him, so with all, it was Miss Fairfield's performance that was most admired. A very pretty girl and a stranger (for who had noticed the Carey's governess?) was bound to be an object of interest in a neighbourhood where strangers were rare and beauty not common.

Mrs. Dashwood had made a point of speaking to her at once, and thanking her for her kindness in taking her daughter's place, and, when she left to return to Margaret, others followed, asking Lady Middleton for the

introduction, or introducing themselves, until an admiring cluster gathered round the place on the lawn where Sabrina stood in her filmy draperies. All of which was more gratifying to Miss Fairfield than to the other young ladies, who had all done their best, and had learned very much longer parts. But rewards are most unequally distributed in this world, and there could be no question that, whoever deserved recognition, it was chiefly to the attendant Spirit, whose boy's voice had happened to be delightful in the summoning song, and to "Sabrina fair" herself; who had taken no great pains with her part, that it was given.

There was to be an informal ball at the Park in the evening. Sir Francis and Lady Carey took their little girls home, but kindly left Miss Fairfield to enjoy the dancing. However humdrum a life she might look forward to on the morrow, the afternoon and evening of this day were all that could be desired.

Mrs. Jennings had planned to walk down to the Cottage early in the morning after the play to inquire for Miss Margaret and to tell her all about it, but Margaret's indisposition increased, and a week had passed before she could sit up in her room and take any interest in affairs outside it.

Elinor and her mother nursed her with the greatest affection and concern. Every day a messenger came from the Park bringing fruit, flowers and inquiries, and every day Walter Carey rode over from Newton for the same purpose. Elinor, though she did not always remember to give Margaret messages from Mrs. Jennings and Sir John, never failed to inform her of Walter's visits, and it was not long before Margaret became aware that her sister had formed plans and hopes for her, which were to terminate in her becoming the future Lady Carey of Newton Hall.

She was gradually becoming stronger, but was not considered well enough to read, or to bear anyone reading aloud to her. Her mind was consequently unoccupied, and all the hopes and fears and longings she had hardly kept at bay now overwhelmed her.

Compared with Walter, of whom so much was known, how little she knew of this man who occupied her thoughts. She had seen him only four times,

and hardly as many hours had been spent in his society. He came of “low people,” said Sir John. Walter was the only son of a baronet. His profession was precarious and arduous. Walter’s position was one of ease, and would be one of wealth. ‘‘The hardships of a naval officer’s wife,’ said Mrs. Palmer. The beauty and comfort of Newton Hall again came to her mind. “No stability of character,” Elinor had said; but what did she or Mamma or anyone else know about that? “I will come back. You will wait,” he had said—and with that she saw again his grave face, and, try as she might, she could not displace it with Walter’s good-humoured smile. She must see him again before she could decide. If he disappointed her—were not what she remembered—she might turn to Walter; but, at the thought, she felt again the old hope and fear and longing with which her thoughts began. Over and over again, round and round with the persistence of a feverish brain, and the monotony of a tired one, until she imagined she would be glad if she could think that she need never see either of these men again as long as she lived.

A week had passed in restless questionings and decisions. She was sitting in her room and hoping that the long-deferred call from Mrs. Jennings would be deferred still longer when she heard that lady’s voice in the hall. Her mother was out walking, and her sister was in charge. Mrs. Jennings had endeared herself to Elinor in past days, and was always sure of more indulgence from her than from others of the family, and Margaret had little doubt that the visitor would be brought upstairs before long.

Soon she could hear snatches of their conversation as they ascended the staircase.

“You could have knocked me down with a feather, Mrs. Ferrars. Indeed, I can hardly believe it yet. Lady Middleton, too, is surprised beyond measure. What your sister will say I do not know! It is the sort of thing that could not have been foreseen, nor prevented, or we would all have acted very differently. She should never have had your sister’s part at all in my opinion.”

The door opened, and Mrs. Jennings came in, a look of such extreme

melancholy on her round, rosy face as made it exceedingly difficult for Margaret to avoid laughing at so incongruous an expression. It was evident, however, that something real, or at least real to her visitor, was causing the trouble, and Margaret quickly assumed a look of sympathy as she held out her hand.

It was taken in both of Mrs. Jennings, and almost in tears she cried:

"Oh, my poor dear! Do not you be sorry for me, my love! Be sorry for yourself! I can hardly bear to tell you, after all the teasings and jokings I have done, but your beau is to marry some one else, and how he can choose so beneath him when he might have had you is more than I can understand."

Margaret's look of bewilderment brought her sister to her help.

"Mrs. Jennings has come to tell us of Mr. Atherton's engagement," Elinor said quickly. "A source of congratulations to us all, dear Mrs. Jennings, believe me. The vicarage needs a mistress and Miss Fairfield will be a most agreeable neighbour to my mother and sister when she becomes Mrs. Atherton."

The relief sent the blood to Margaret's cheeks and the smile to her lips. Mrs. Jennings could not now imagine her to be otherwise than pleasantly affected by the news, and, as soon as this was understood and believed, the story could be unfolded with all the enjoyment proper to the recital.

"It seems he first noticed her at the picnic, so I say it is another marriage to the credit of Barton Park, for you must have seen, my dears, that Sir John is for ever planning to bring young people together, and let them have a chance to make it up between themselves. Well, then, it all began at the picnic, and then it went on at the rehearsals. There they were behind the same bush all the time, every rehearsal, and she so sweet and willing, and ready to do every one's bidding. Then off you all went to Newton, and it seems he passed some of the day with her and the children, and you may be sure it was her he was thinking of and not the children. I hope they may have some little ones of their own, for I am sure they both know how to manage them, which is more than my daughter Middleton does—but it's

early days to think of that. Then, in the evening he schemed to get a dance with her when she was playing for the ball. He says you helped him there and indeed he is very grateful to all who have brought them together. And over head and ears in love he is—I will say that for him—and it is to his credit too, for she hasn't a penny piece, but he goes on about her as if she had a hundred thousand pounds. All the time I thought him wanting to marry you; I never thought him such a pretty-behaved fellow as he is, though my daughter Middleton liked him more before this happened she says. However, that's neither here nor there, for Miss Fairfield likes him enough for ten, and that's all that matters to him."'

CHAPTER XXII

MR. ATHERTON'S engagement was the chief topic of conversation on the ensuing days. All Margaret's visitors must have something to say about it. It appeared that he had been very liberal in his confidences and every one could report something he had told them of the state of his mind either before or after his acceptance.

The power of love in determining the actions of humanity was once more demonstrated. Mr. Atherton could not quite succeed in attaching himself to Margaret, and altogether failed to win her affections, even though he had the inducement of a promised fortune. Now he was not only very much in love himself, but had obtained from the lady that gratitude and pleasure in his addresses which would certainly develop into a satisfactory degree of conjugal affection, all without any money in the question at all.

Mr. Atherton, though perhaps a little unreserved in his raptures, was a very much more respectable figure in the eyes of the ladies at Barton Cottage than he had been before. Miss Fairfield was an agreeable girl. His affection for her was readily understood, and if hers for him were increased by the prospect of a comfortable home and an affectionate companion in place of a dull school-room and other people's children, it was not the less comprehensible for that. It was expected that she would prove a valuable neighbour.

Walter Carey's attentions did not diminish as Margaret grew stronger, and Elinor's encouragement of his visits became an anxiety. Elinor had interpreted Margaret's moment of agitation over Mrs. Jennings's news, "Your beau is to marry some one else," as having reference to Walter, and in giving him every facility to see her sister believed herself to be doing a double service. That is, she wished to believe it, but was not always able to think of Margaret as being happy in the visits.

Margaret had an intense longing to escape from it all. The days of confinement to her room after a summer spent in the valley of Barton had

given her a feeling of being hemmed in on all sides, and Elinor, and even her mother, increased this sensation by their affectionate solicitude. She longed greatly for change of scene and society, so much so that she took the first step to gaining her desire by confessing to her mother how much 'she would like to go away'. She would even be willing for them to pay a short visit to her brother at Norland Park rather than remain without change.

"We can get back before the autumn, mamma. I should not wish to stay long, but we have the month of September before us, and it is a pleasant month at Norland or anywhere."

Mrs. Dashwood was not prepared to take her daughter to Norland Park. The discussions with John Dashwood relating to Margaret's marriage had given her no desire for his company, and the subsequent engagement of Mr. Atherton could not but be the occasion for reproaches, either expressed or felt, which would be neither pleasant nor profitable. Margaret, having no idea of her brother's plans for her happiness, could not be aware how deeply he would resent Miss Fairfield's.

Mrs. Dashwood would not hear of their going to Norland Park, but the idea that Margaret needed some change took root in her mind, and she suggested to Elinor that her sister should return to Delaford with her, and pass some time with Marianne. Elinor was very unwilling for such an arrangement to be made.

"Consider, mamma," she said, " how much Margaret might be sacrificing when indulging this whim. Do you not think it would be an admirable thing if she became engaged to Walter Carey? It would be a marriage in every way desirable, and I cannot think it unlikely."

"My Elinor, do not let us become affected by the Park, and imagine every young man who is reasonably attentive to be a possible suitor," replied Mrs. Dashwood. "Margaret is very young. It is probable that she has not yet seen the man she is to marry. I cannot allow my plans to be ruled by any such consideration."

Elinor could not restrain a smile. Her mother's variableness was no doubt

one of her attractions, but it was impossible for a more sober-minded daughter to forget so easily how her mother had furthered her own meetings with Edward at a time when she herself would have greatly preferred not to see him, and that Colonel Brandon undoubtedly owed his present happiness to his mother-in-law's warm-hearted assistance. Marianne had always been quick to follow her mother's mood, and at this point would have repudiated all idea of arranging Margaret's future, but Elinor's steadiness of purpose did not falter,

"I am convinced," she went on, "that the marriage is expected, and would be welcomed by the Careys. Isabella has said as much to me on more than one occasion, and therefore I do not see why it should not be expected and desired by ourselves. There can be no indelicacy in wishing Walter Carey well. He makes no secret of his attachment, and I very much wish that Margaret would be equally unreserved. I sometimes fear she still thinks of Commander Pennington, and consider how advantageous it would be for this to be settled before he returns—if he ever does return."

"I imagine her mind is not made up, therefore she can have nothing to confide," said Mrs. Dashwood. '' You would not wish to hurry her decision; and, indeed," recollecting herself, "I have no knowledge that a decision is to be made. Young men do have their fancies, and it is quite unnecessary to take them seriously."

"It is just for that reason that I feel Margaret should stay at home. If she leaves Walter may become attracted by some one else. It is a very desirable marriage, and, though I would not wish to take any action in order to bring it about, I do not see that we need do anything to discourage it. If Margaret goes to Delaford it will seem to Walter that she desires to put an end to everything."

"I cannot take so serious a view of a change of air for an invalid," Mrs. Dashwood said with impatience. "Walter would be a very unreasonable young man indeed, and an exasperating husband, if he did not consider Margaret's health to be a more important consideration than his own pleasure in seeing her. I have no idea of his being of so exacting a nature."

Elinor found herself no longer able to keep pace with her mother's change of front, but perceiving that, for whatever reason, the visit to Delaford was considered desirable, she gave up the discussion and limited herself to writing to Edward to make a suggestion which would ensure Margaret's absence from home being short.

Her plan was that Margaret should travel with Sir John alone; that she herself should remain with her mother; and that, as it would become necessary for Edward to fetch his wife later in the month, he could at the same time bring Margaret back to Barton. The advantages of this would be that her mother would not be left alone and that the time of her sister's return would be fixed by her own and Edward's wishes. By remaining at Barton she would be able to take some care of Walter's feelings. She had been very much pleased with the young man, and her interest was awakened for his happiness almost more than for her sister's good, and, though smiling as she thought of her mother comparing her with Mrs. Jennings and Sir John, she did not feel ashamed of her wise ordering of other people's affairs.

Margaret learnt with great pleasure of the scheme so arranged. On an early day in September she was to leave Barton unaccompanied either by her mother or Elinor, with no companion but Sir John, whose wit would soon be lulled to rest by the motion of the carriage. He would sleep, and she would look out of the window and see other fields and other houses, and a different breed of cattle.

At the end of the journey there would be Marianne, beautiful and affectionate, and not too familiar; the mansion-house with its spacious rooms and comfortable corners, and the grounds surrounding it with trees and lawns. There she hoped to escape from her thoughts into wider interests. Colonel Brandon had always something to say worth hearing. Marianne had the newest books and music, and Edward Ferrars at the parsonage was always friendly. No one would think very much about her, or give her any hints or advice.

Sir John agreed to the scheme, after complaining that he would have only

one young lady to amuse him instead of two. Edward, though reluctant to be without his wife for a further period, was willing to do as she desired, Mrs. Dashwood was glad to have Elinor's visit prolonged. Marianne wrote many affectionate messages on Edward's second sheet, and Walter Carey, though not consulted beforehand, was not more than reasonably disappointed on hearing that Margaret was to visit her sister in Dorset until her health should be completely restored.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE journey could easily be accomplished in a single day, but Sir John favoured an early start, and was at the door in his chaise before Margaret had finished breakfast. The morning was fair and, the parting over, Margaret settled herself to enjoyment. She was soon relieved of all necessity of attending to Sir John by the regular sound of his slumbers, and the remainder of the journey, with short halts for refreshment and change of horses, was spent by her in the delight of the scenery. She, who had become so greatly wearied by ordinary home-life with power of movement and change of occupation, was rested beyond measure by sitting still in a cramped space and listening to the snoring of her solitary companion. So great is the power of change of scene on a restless heart.

She arrived at Delaford feeling fresher than when she had set out. As for Sir John, when he had completed the series of jerks and groans with which he roused himself at the stopping of the carriage, he was ready to assert to Colonel Brandon that they had made a capital journey, were great companions, and that he himself had enjoyed every minute of it, though he knew Miss Margaret must have regretted that she had not one of her beaux with her in place of an old fellow like himself.

Sir John might talk about beaux here, but there was no one to heed him, and he was soon engaged in a rational conversation with Colonel Brandon while the sisters chatted in affectionate intimacy.

They were a party of five for dinner, as Edward Ferrars walked up from the parsonage to join them and to look in at the nursery. Marianne's beauty, Colonel Brandon's sense, Edward's affection, and Sir John's comparative quietness combined to soothe and comfort Margaret's spirits, while the spacious dining-room and well laid-out garden, into which she strolled with her arm in her sister's after dinner, helped to induce the sense of air and space, mentally and bodily, which was so exactly what she had desired. They sat under the trees while Marianne talked of the children, of her

greenhouse, of the neighbours and of her husband. Margaret indulged her in sympathetic attention, and an hour passed till the cool of the evening suggested their returning indoors.

They were joined by the gentlemen in the drawing-room for tea. While sitting in the half-circle round the wood fire, which had been lit as a special grace for the travellers, Edward said suddenly:

"I am reminded, I do not know why, unless it is by the pleasant blaze of that fire, and the company of Marianne and Margaret, but I am reminded of a conversation we held long ago at Barton Cottage. Margaret then remarked how delightful it would be if some one gave us each a large fortune and we all went to work to find some way of using it. Do you remember, Marianne? I recollect that your mother said she would be puzzled how to spend it herself if her children were all to be rich without her help. Do you, Marianne, feel that you have no longer any wishes for yourself, but only for that fine boy upstairs?"

"Indeed, no, Edward! There are many things I should like to do. I would still like, as you suggested then, to endow young painters and writers; to buy books and pictures and music; to have my house often filled with needy artists, and in every way to assist and encourage them."

Colonel Brandon was applied to, but would only say that, if he had a fortune given to him, no doubt Marianne would have the spending of it. He would have to make one stipulation, that he was allowed a library or a study, or some sort of snuggery to himself, and that no artist or musical or literary genius should have to be admitted.

"You would be a very poor host if you made such restrictions," said Marianne rebukingly.

"I should be a very poor man if I could not have any place to myself. We could make it a shabby sort of hole with a north aspect and only one good seat by the fire, so that the geniuses would like the other parts of my house better, but one place of my own I must have."'

Marianne allowed him this indulgence with an affectionate smile, and Edward was asked to declare his wishes.

"I do not think I have any pronounced desires. I should find it very difficult to change my mode of life to correspond with wealth. I believe I must do as Colonel Brandon does, and leave the spending of it to my wife. What do you say, Margaret? It was you who first wanted a fortune."

"I should travel,"' said Margaret.

"By gad, that's the thing," said Sir John. "All my life I have wanted to go shooting in Scotland. Fine sport there, I believe! But, what with the expense of the journey and not having anyone to go with me, it has always been impossible. But there is nothing I should like more! Nothing on my life!"

"I do not see why we should wait for some one to give us a large fortune apiece before you have your desire, Sir John," said Colonel Brandon. "I have a friend who has frequently asked me to go and shoot over the moors, and, though the journey would take some days, if you are not averse to travelling, I should particularly enjoy it. Marianne will have Margaret here for companion, and we would not be away above a month."

Marianne's countenance showed that the conversation had taken a turn which did not please her; but the offer had been made and Sir John was accepting it with readiness. It was immediately arranged that when Sir John had recovered from the short journey and had a few days' shooting round the Delaford Hangers, he should accompany his host on the longer expedition, and not return to Delaford till early in October. His home-going to Barton must be still more remote, but Margaret was not relying on his chaise to convey her, and was therefore indifferent to his plans.

Marianne was very unwilling to face so long a separation from her husband. She was always easily moved to joy or sorrow and had only just got accustomed to the ecstasy of her sister's arrival, after a separation of four months, before she was called upon to face the grief of her husband's departure on a visit of pleasure for the space of a few weeks.

In the meantime the days passed happily. Marianne's nursery was well-ordered, and the two little cousins spent only a reasonable time with their elders, and were taught to behave themselves on these occasions. Sir John

remarked with wonder that he should never have known there were children in the house, for nobody had to search for something they had taken, or mop up something they had spilt, or mend something they had torn. Her ladyship told him that their children were specially high-spirited, and he supposed that was the reason for their making such a commotion.

The evenings were spent at the instrument. Marianne could not bear to hear Edward read aloud, as she declared he lacked spirit in the performance, and she was too impatient to read well herself, but Margaret was very well pleased to listen again to her sister's songs, and to take her place at the pianoforte when she was allowed.

The few days passed, and Colonel Brandon and Sir John started on their journey leaving a sensation of blankness behind them which would only be filled by prevailing on Edward to spend the day at the mansion-house.

He came. Played with his child. Talked of the news-sheet, and told them how far the travellers would be on their way, but it was clear that he was out of spirits, and it was not long before Marianne taxed him with this, and demanded to know the cause.

"I will not say that I am in low spirits," he replied, "but rather that I am perturbed. A man does not know how to deal with domestic situations, and I feel I am threatened—that is, I expect—I mean my mother has written to say that she intends paying me a few days' visit. She is coming with Robert. Lucy is to remain in London, which is a relief, but my mother and Robert will be with me from Monday to Friday next week. I am, of course, glad to receive my mother, but I could wish that Elinor were at home to help in her entertainment."

"Oh, my dear Edward," cried Marianne. "Be thankful that Elinor is not at home! It would be worse—ten times worse if she were. Remember, Mrs. Ferrars is your mother. She has no doubt some affection for you, but think how she dislikes Elinor, and think, only think, of her manners to her. You could not have brought me better news. I rejoice to think that my sister is spared this visit."

Edward could not but look rather foolish at this fervent condemnation of

his mother's manners, but being a peaceable man, and having an affectionate regard for Marianne, he made no objection, contenting himself with the thought that it was not unlikely that in the course of the visit he must listen to even stronger reprobation from his mother of Marianne or other of his new connections. He would allow both criticisms and would agree with neither.

CHAPTER XXIV

AFFECTIONATE mother though she was, Mrs. Dashwood rejoiced in Margaret's departure. She had looked so thin, so weary, and so low in spirits since her illness that the sight of her was a continual distress to her mother, who knew not what to do to help her.

Elinor's visit had coincided with a loss of confidence with Margaret of which no explanation had occurred to her mother. She did not know that she had been quoted to Margaret as reprobating instability in her friend and that so unjust and unnecessary a condemnation had been with reason resented. Mrs. Dashwood not only did not know that this remark had been repeated, she did not know that it had been made. She did, however, realize that Elinor and Margaret had no great affection for each other, beyond that proper to the tie of relationship. They were sisters, but they were not friends, and Mrs. Dashwood was conscious that she preferred their society one at a time. Marianne and Margaret had much more in common, and would be happy together, and when her Elinor had gone her Margaret would come back and all would be as before, if not more delightful than ever. Mrs. Dashwood was usually able to look forward to perfect bliss.

Sir John's departure had begun the break-up of the party at the Park. Mrs. Jennings returned to London, taking Miss Steele with her, and Lady Middleton and the children were to follow her thither in a few days. The frequent visiting and invitations from the Park now ceased. Mr. Atherton did not intend neglect, but he was so much engaged in going to Newton Hall that he came to the Cottage not more than thrice in the week. Mary Whitaker was, however, a constant visitor, and could be depended on to bring news of the outer world.

Mr. Willoughby's reappearance in the neighbourhood after four years of absence had been the subject of some comment. It was known that at one time he had enjoyed the favour of old Mrs. Smith of Allenham Court, that he had paid yearly visits to her, and that she had been heard to speak of him

as her heir. Then the time came when the servants at Allenham had reported to their acquaintances in Barton village that the old lady had taken a dislike to Mr. John, and for several years he had not come near the place. Last spring he was there again, and Mrs. Willoughby with him, and Mrs. Smith seemed fully as fond of him as ever before, though she had not taken to the lady. Mr. John had a way with him that pleased the old mistress, and when she was taken ill later in the summer it was " John! John! John!" she must have, and no one else would do. He had come, and she had rallied and got about again, and before he went away Mr. John had promised he would come if ever she wanted him, no matter where he was. Little did he think he would only see her again in her coffin! But so it was! Mrs. Smith's own maid had gone into her bedroom as she always did to draw the blinds, and it gave her a turn to see how white the mistress looked there on the pillow, and she did but touch her hand, and it was cold as death—and well it might be cold, for the old lady was dead, and though they sent for the apothecary he could do nothing but send for her lawyer, and he it was that had sent for Mr. John. Such was the tale known to the village, and brought to Mrs. Dashwood by Mary Whitaker, who had it from Mrs. Brent at the shop.

It was possible therefore that in the future the Willoughbys would be the near neighbours of the ladies at Barton Cottage unless Allenham Court were sold or let, which, as Elinor pointed out, was at least possible. Mrs. Dashwood rejoiced in her forethought in again admitting Mr. Willoughby to their acquaintance, for nothing could be more uncomfortable than to be constantly avoiding him. Elinor could not but think that the Willoughbys would have been less likely to settle at Allenham Court if her mother and Margaret had been unforgiving.

At present all was surmise, for the intelligence received had its source in the servants' hall at the Court, and trickled through various channels before reaching the Cottage.

The funeral was not long past before a more trustworthy informant arrived to give them fuller particulars. Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor were sitting together in the parlour when "Mr. Willoughby" was announced, and he

followed Thomas into the room with his old impetuosity.

He took Mrs. Dashwood's hand—she could not withhold it—and pressed it in his. He bowed to Elinor, who made a slight movement of greeting, but it was to Mrs. Dashwood that he addressed himself. He came to tell her, what she already knew, that he was the new owner of Allenham. He spoke of his shame at having forfeited her friendship, his desire for its renewal, his intention of spending some months every year at Allenham, and his fear lest this should be displeasing to her hough it appeared so desirable to himself. He hoped she would visit his wife, but feared he was asking too much. He ceased—and Mrs. Dashwood could make her reply. It was such as might be expected by those who knew her. She saw no reason why they should not be neighbours. She would have pleasure in making Mrs. Willoughby's acquaintance. There was nothing in the past to be regretted. All had turned out for the best.

"No, no, madam! That I cannot allow. Best for Marianne, no doubt! It could not be well for her to depend for her happiness on such a one as myself. But for me? No, no! I protest, my regrets must be lifelong, and not the less for being deserved."

Mrs. Dashwood could not but smile at such disarming humility and, with the comfortable adage that bygones should be bygones, changed the conversation by an inquiry as to the details of Mrs. Smith's last illness. It was hoped that she did not suffer. He replied suitably, and with the appearance of feeling; and, taking the hint that no further reference to the past was desired, he began to discuss the neighbourhood, the improvements he intended, the tenants of the various farms, and spoke of Grice's farm as one that was in good order and occupied by valuable tenants.

"I happened to go there in July for a friend's address, and had a look round the place and a chat with Mrs. Grice. My friend was staying there last April, but, unfortunately, though I was then at Allenham, I did not know of his being so near until he was gone. I heard he was in the Baltic, but had to get the name of the sloop he is commanding. Did you happen to hear of him? Pennington is his name."

Mrs. Dashwood remarked that he had dined at the Park.

"Yes, that is how I heard of his visit. I was amazingly disappointed, for I should like of all things to see him again. These naval officers are for ever slipping through one's fingers."

"How did you make his acquaintance?" asked Elinor. She had not spoken before this, and Willoughby started slightly, but turned to her, all attention.

"I met him fairly often at his club playing cards," he replied. "I preferred to have him as a partner rather than as an opponent, so you can guess the degree of his proficiency. He is well known at the club, and generally liked. I am only one of his admirers,"

Elinor was satisfied with this reply. It confirmed her opinion that Commander Pennington was all he ought not to be, and she felt a slight relenting towards Willoughby for having furnished this information. Her mother saw with amusement how the conversation affected her, but did not pursue it. Willoughby inquired for Margaret, and learnt that she was quite recovered, was at Delaford with Mrs. Brandon, and was not expected home for some weeks. He thought the air of Delaford and the society—likely to be of great benefit, and mentioned the theatricals with just enough of wit and sense and not too much of either; spoke of Mr. Atherton's approaching marriage, and commended his choice; alluded to his regret that Margaret had been unable to take the part of Sabrina, admired her voice, compared it, again with a sigh, to Mrs. Brandon's. Mrs. Dashwood was about to weary of his conversation when he got up to take leave, expressing his sincere gratitude for the graciousness of his reception.

CHAPTER XXV

ELINOR represented to her mother that the account Willoughby gave of his friend should be communicated to Margaret, but Mrs. Dashwood would not hear of it.

"I will not have Margaret troubled in the matter. We know nothing of his feeling, or of hers, and I am disinclined to exert any influence. Certainly it appears that he may be something of a fashionable gambler, but we have only the word of one man, and he not very trustworthy, and it is most probable that Commander Pennington's character in no wise concerns us. I cannot have Margaret's mind disturbed and her recovery retarded by any disquieting statements which cannot be proved, and which would probably only serve to remind her of an incident which is best forgotten."

Elinor's judgment was thus overruled and no letter was sent to Margaret describing Willoughby's visit. However, she felt herself at liberty to write freely to Marianne. They had always been deeply attached, and were completely in each other's confidence. It was but natural that her letter should be without reserve. She crossed it at the end with the words, "Do not speak of all this to Margaret," but as Marianne did not notice this addition till she had read and reread the letter, and discussed its contents with Margaret, the instruction might as well have been omitted.

BARTON COTTAGE,
September 14th, 1813.
My DEAREST MARIANNE

You will be surprised to hear of the visitor who called yesterday, and I have some fear that you will also be displeased. It was John Willoughby. Margaret may have told you that he has been in the neighbourhood this summer, as she herself has seen more of him than we have. I was at first unwilling to acknowledge his acquaintance, but my mother wished that we should keep up the outward appearance of civility, and Margaret has

danced with him on two occasions.We were not, however, prepared for his calling at Barton Cottage.

Mrs. Smith has lately died, and he and Mrs. Willoughby will live at Allenham for some months in the year, and he came to beg my mother to notice his wife. She agreed. You know her goodness of heart, but I cannot but fear you will not approve so much complaisance. Do not, however, be alarmed, my dearest sister, we will not allow you to be annoyed by meeting them. It will not be difficult to time your visits to Barton so that they shall not coincide with the Willoughbys' residence at Allenham. One further communication I must tell you which troubles me for Margaret. You will know from her that she has lately made the acquaintance of a Commander Pennington in circumstances which I cannot but think were neither to the credit of his manners nor of her discretion. However, the acquaintance was made, and led to his calling on my mother and some promise of his seeing them again on his return to England. I regret to say that Willoughby claims this man as his friend, plays cards with him at his club, and describes him as a proficient gamester, well known in London clubs as such. I hope, however, that his idea has already been effectually dispelled from her mind by the advances of Walter Carey, who begged to have news of her yesterday, and sends her his best regards. The former incident, as our mother says, is best forgotten, and I dare say it has already passed from Margaret's mind.

I hope little Edward is good and gives you no trouble that can be avoided.

Forgive me, my dearest sister, for vexing you with all this concerning the past, but the annoyance must be known to you now or later. I look forward to being with you again; but enjoy our mother's society in the extreme.

Yours affectionately,

ELINOR FERRARS.

Marianne was very much surprised on getting this letter, as none of the confidences which Elinor supposed to have passed between Margaret and herself had taken place.

She carried it at once to her sister, and laughingly taxed her with concealment.

"To think that you have seen Willoughby and danced with him, and told me nothing of it. I insist on hearing all about him at once. He was quite a beau of mine, as Miss Steele would say. It is amazing to look back and see how differently I felt in those days, and how little I then thought of the man who is now so dear to me. But tell me of Willoughby, Margaret. I must hear all about him. Did he ask for me?"

Margaret told her of the stream of questions and outspoken admiration which had formed the main part of his conversation, and Marianne was greatly entertained.

"Of course you were right, Margaret, to listen to him and be agreeable. Why should poor Willoughby be shunned? It is all so long ago, and not of any moment now. But now tell me of this Commander Pennington, his friend."

Margaret felt instant agitation, but she asked as quietly as she could:

"What do you know of him?"

"Nay, rather what do you know ? Our prudent Elinor says you made his acquaintance in circumstances that reflect no credit on his manners or on your discretion, and that our mother declares the incident is best forgotten. Come, Margaret, I must know! Consider how dull a life I lead, my husband away and no one to amuse me but Edward and yourself. Do not deny me the pleasure of a little romance."

Margaret turned away. She was unable to speak. She could not recount the incidents lightly. She would not willingly make much of them. Marianne, perceiving her distress, took her gently by the hand and said:

"Is it possible that this is more serious than my mother and Elinor believe? Will you not confide in me, Margaret? I will not advise you or blame you for indiscretion. I have been too indiscreet myself to wish to influence you, but you are sure of my sympathy and of my affection."

Margaret's reserve was broken down. She told her sister of the meeting on the downs, of her dread of discussion, of the second meeting, and the third,

and lastly, of the visit to the Cottage. She did not dwell on these, but her memory was so exact, her account so clear, that it was evident to Marianne that her sister had been deeply affected. She led the conversation to Walter Carey, and his message, and saw in her sister's face that the topic was distasteful. She returned to Commander Pennington, and spoke of his being a friend of Willoughby's.

"I rather think that our dear Elinor, in the goodness of her heart towards me, is ready to think ill of any friend of Willoughby's, but, indeed, I do not think it such a serious charge. Willoughby had many friends of all degrees of intimacy. They all play cards at the clubs, but I do not know that there need be any wrong-doing about that. I do not consider it is proved that your friend should be called a gamester. As to your meeting and talking on the downs, it seems to me of all things most natural. Were you to turn your back on him after the service he had done you? I sympathize with you, too, on the question of secrecy. Willoughby and I were less careful, and we suffered much from Sir John and dear old Mrs. Jennings, whom I have long forgiven for the miserable moments she gave me."

Margaret found the relief of this full confidence and understanding to be very great. She had not spoken to her mother on the subject since learning from Elinor that her mother's opinion of Commander Pennington was unfavourable, and she was young enough to need the relief of speaking her thoughts. Marianne was delighted. Her joy in romance was her strength as well as her weakness, and she was made very happy by hearing of this which might prove to be a genuine case of love at first sight.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE elder Mrs, Ferrars was connected with the Dashwoods in two ways. John Dashwood had married her daughter, Fanny, and her elder son, Edward, was the husband of Elinor. In spite of these intermarriages the two families were very far from being intimate. Mrs. Dashwood had never been in company with Mrs. Ferrars, Marianne only once, and that four years ago.

Mrs. Ferrars was a woman whose only claim to eminence was her lack of amiability. True, she was also wealthy, but a number of people were wealthier, while for sheer ill-nature, unrelieved by any more important vice, Mrs. Ferrars attained distinction. Even when obliged to say or do something that would ordinarily give pleasure she could contrive to say or do it in a disagreeable manner. Her visit to Edward was purposely ill-timed. She disliked his wife rather more than she disliked most of her acquaintances, and to come when Elinor was away, and the household not at its best, was a sure way of humiliating her in several ways at once. By coming when her son was alone she made it clear that she did not wish to see his wife. By finding the domestic arrangements inadequate, the inefficiency of Elinor as a housekeeper was demonstrated; and in upsetting the servants, by introducing two of her own to wait on her, she could feel assured that Elinor's return home would be rendered less agreeable by the complaints of her maids.

Edward himself could feel no pleasure in the thought of his mother's visit. She despised him for his profession, for his wife, for his lack of fashion, and for his love of rational pursuits. In order to enforce her disapproval she brought Robert, the younger brother, whom she professed to admire for being the opposite of her elder son. Mrs. Ferrars travelled in state in her own carriage with her man and maid following in a hired chaise. They were to arrive in time for dinner on Monday and stay till the following Friday.

Edward implored Marianne to come and do the honours of his dinner-table, but she would not consent to break in on the family party, only

promising that she and Margaret would walk down to drink tea with them later. They arrived at the parsonage at a time when Edward had come to the end of his conversation and was sitting in awkward silence, while Robert whistled and examined the pictures, and Mrs. Ferrars was fully occupied in looking displeased.

The entrance of two pretty young women could not but be interesting to Robert, who stared at them until he was introduced, bowed, and then stared again. Mrs. Ferrars remarked disparagingly that Margaret was very like Elinor. Robert, with the intention of being agreeable, remarked that his mother was wrong. Miss Margaret was better looking than Elinor. Mrs. Ferrars maintained that she was right in thinking them very much alike—they were both pale and small—and Edward was called upon to decide on the relative beauty, or lack of beauty, of his wife and her sister.

Marianne had learnt something in her contact with the world of fashion. She knew that some forms of insolence were best met by a like incivility. She therefore called on Edward to decide whether the absent Fanny were most like her mother, Mrs. Ferrars, or her brother, Mr. Robert, and would have continued the discussion in detail, with comments on the shapes of noses and the expression of eyes, if Edward had not stopped it by some obvious remark about the impossibility of deciding on likenesses as every one saw them differently.

Mrs. Ferrars eyed her opponent with some degree of liking, This was much better than Elinor's quiet respect, Fanny's affectionate admiration, or even than Lucy's servile adulation. It was seldom that she met with a young woman who might very well be rude to her, if sufficiently annoyed. Margaret need only be ignored, but it could be expected that there would be pleasure in contradicting Marianne, and even in being contradicted by her.

The next subject of conversation was the surprisingly early hour at which Edward dined. She had been unable to eat a dinner at four o'clock, and she could not take supper. Travelling was very uncomfortable if it entailed such irregular meals. Here again Marianne was ready for her. The time that Elinor and Edward had fixed for their dinner hour was exactly that chosen

by the King and the Royal Family, having been recommended to the King by the Royal physician as being the best hour to ensure perfect health. Again Edward stopped Marianne's flow of talk by remarking that it was impossible to decide on the best time for dinner as every one preferred a different one, but his mother had but to say what time she liked and it should be arranged. This, however, did not please Mrs. Ferrars, for it robbed her of a ground of complaint. She remarked that she could not think of making any such suggestion, and then considered a few moments before making her next attack.

Marianne employed the interval by telling Edward some of the clever things small Edward had been saying, all of which were noticed by the grandmother with only one remark:

"All children talk in that way if they are too much indulged."

Mrs. Ferrars now asked for Marianne's agreement on a point in question between herself and Edward. She was dissatisfied to find that Edward was unwilling to leave the parish for the space of a week or two in order to accompany her to Scotland, She evidently did not particularly desire his society, but she did not like to have to go alone. Edward, though ready enough to yield on unimportant matters, was now firm. He would not consider absenting himself from Sunday duty. As Robert had engagements in town there was no help for it. Their mother must go to Scotland alone. Marianne expressed pity for the lonely traveller, but agreed with Edward that he could not leave his work to make one of his mother's retinue.

"It is unfortunate, madam, that you did not come here a little earlier. My husband and his friend are but just gone to Scotland and would have been happy to escort you," said Marianne with more of politeness than truth.

Mrs. Ferrars made no reply, with the design of showing Marianne that the happiness would not have been shared.

"They have gone to stay with Lord G- to shoot on the moors," Marianne added.

This intelligence roused Mrs, Ferrars, whose acquaintance did not include so many titles as to render her indifferent to them. Mrs. Brandon, though

Elinor's sister, appeared to know some people of importance. She was also rich and handsome, and these advantages began to have some effect on Mrs. Ferrars.

"And why did you not go with them?" she asked.

"I had my sister with me and the care of the two children,'' replied Marianne.

Mrs. Ferrars darted a vicious look at Margaret, as though to say that she did not matter, and continued:

"Elinor should return. She has been away quite long enough. If she came back you could join your husband. Edward, if you will go and fetch Elinor home I will take Mrs. Brandon to Scotland. We will start on Friday."

Marianne resolutely declined, but Mrs. Ferrars only looked at her with renewed distaste, and said;

"You should be with your husband. Young women should be with their husbands. Elinor should not be so long from Edward, and you should come to Scotland with me."

Edward was roused to saying that Elinor might not wish to come home yet, and that Margaret must be considered.

Robert was all for solving this problem by taking Miss Margaret back to London with him to visit Lucy, and Mrs. Ferrars dealt with it by remarking that there would be room in the carriage for Miss Margaret if she did not mind sitting backward.

Marianne again declared that she had not the power to accept Mrs. Ferrars's kind offer of conveying her to her husband, and soon afterwards took leave, being sped on her way by a look of resentment from the little lady's eye and a final "You should be with your husband." While Margaret was dismissed with a nod and the information that she was certainly very like her sister Elinor.

Marianne was not so entirely opposed to the scheme of joining her husband in Scotland as she had pretended. The difficulties were not great, and she had only dwelt on them with the intention of being contradictory. She felt—Marianne was incapable of scheming—but she felt, without

putting it into words, that to decline Mrs, Ferrars's proposal would only make her more determined that it should be accepted. It would certainly be renewed on every occasion that they met, with added venom and reproach. As the sisters returned to the mansion-house Marianne put before Margaret the advantage of the scheme, beginning with the charm of being again with her husband and ending with that of being in a position to tease Mrs. Ferrars through a journey of several days.

"I delight in vexing her. She has not been opposed as she should, and it must be of use to her to have something to be cross about and some one who deserves her displeasure. She would be just as cross anyway, and for less reason. I consider that, while amusing myself, I do her a real service."

"I question if it would be good for either of you for so long a time as the journey to Scotland would occupy, or in so small a space as her coach."

"No, I should be obliged to rest sometimes, or the enjoyment of quarrelling would lessen. But consider, Margaret, would you not greatly like to see Scotland? You have never been far from home, and you said but a few days ago how much you wished to travel. This method of travelling would be comfortable and respectable. We could not go in a public conveyance, but we may be sure that, however disagreeable Mrs. Ferrars may wish to be, there will be nothing about her arrangements to displease us, Do let us see if it can be managed. Edward could start for Barton to-morrow, and Elinor and he would be back on Friday. Nanny can be trusted to care for the children for the one day that we shall all be away. If you consent I will write to Mamma, and Edward can take it to-morrow."

Margaret saw that her sister was attracted by the idea, and would not oppose her. Edward could be relied on to do as he was asked, for there could be no question of their journeyings interfering with his Sunday work. He would certainly rejoice in the prospect of missing the remainder of his mother's visit, and getting his wife home. Margaret was willing to leave the decision to Marianne. There was no fear that their stay in Scotland would be a long one, for as soon as she was with her husband Marianne would certainly begin to long for her child, and the scheme of joining Colonel

Brandon would be more likely to shorten than to lengthen his absence from home.

CHAPTER XXVII

ELINOR was surprised on Tuesday afternoon, while sitting at work with her mother, to hear familiar footsteps coming up the path. It was Edward, bringing news of the intended visit to Scotland, of Margaret's improved health, of the well-doing of their child, and lastly, though this was not explicitly stated, of his mother's continued ill-temper. Elinor was happy to have him with her, and Mrs. Dashwood scarcely less so. She was delighted with the scheme for taking Margaret to Scotland, delighted to have news of her grandchildren, and, though regretting Elinor's nearer departure, delighted to think of her daughter having the pleasure of her husband's society.

The dinner-hour was never more pleasantly spent, Mrs. Dashwood expressing in every look and word that affection for her sons-in-law which so greatly enhanced the happiness of their wives.

Dinner being over, Edward wished to walk down to the village, where he had left his chaise and horses, see to the comfort of the latter, and call at the parsonage for a word with Mr. Atherton.

Mrs. Dashwood agreed to accompany him, and they walked away together. Elinor was still standing at the gate after seeing them on their way when she became aware of some one approaching from the opposite direction, It was a stranger to her; an agreeable-looking man. He walked fast, and was soon near. Though she had still no idea of his being acquainted with her, from his stopping and bowing she saw that he, at least, claimed some knowledge of her.

"My name is Pennington," he said, acquainted with Mrs. Dashwood and her daughter. "Is it to Mrs. Ferrars that I speak?" This last was a conjecture founded on Willoughby's description of Elinor, which her expression at the moment almost justified.

"Yes, I am Mrs. Ferrars. My mother is out walking. Can I give her a message from you when she returns?" She did not ask him to come in, and

he did not appear to wish it. He only looked at her steadily and asked:

"Is Margaret well?"

She replied in a simple affirmative.

"Is she at home?"

"My sister is at Delaford with Mrs. Brandon," then, as his face showed a determination which she construed correctly, she added: "Unless she has already started for a tour in Scotland."

"You do not know for certain?" he asked.

Elinor replied that she believed they had not started yet. She was angry with herself for telling him so much, but his questions and his look were so direct that she must be sincere.

He thanked her courteously, said he would write to Mrs. Dashwood, and walked off as he had come, leaving her with some regrets for her lack of cordiality. Her regrets would have been increased, though the grounds changed, if she had been able to see round the corner of the lane. For as he walked along with head bent in thought, he was hailed by whom but Willoughby!

Richard Pennington was decidedly the less interested of the two, but he nodded pleasantly, shook hands, and asked:

"What brings you here?"

"Nay, I might rather ask that," said Willoughby. "I thought you were to be in the Baltic for another month at least."'

"We were recalled on the very day I got your letter. We were paid off yesterday."

"Well, then! Again I ask you what brings you here? Here is a man just come ashore, and with money in his pocket, and he spends his time in a Devonshire village. What's the attraction? I know Mrs. Grice was once your nurse, but you can surely do without her for a few months at a time?"

Richard Pennington's reply was that he was leaving Barton at once. Willoughby immediately asked if he was going to London, and if so offered a seat in his curricle.

"I may go to London eventually, but at present I am on my way to a place

called Delaford. Have you any knowledge of its whereabouts?"

"Delaford? I have never been there, but I have a friend, an old friend, who lives at the mansion. I will drive you thither on my way to London, and perhaps call on my friend. NO! best not, but I will certainly take you there. I suppose you have business to transact. Do you know the Brandons? "

Pennington replied that he did not. He did not feel for Willoughby the degree of confidence and friendship which was professed for himself, and though willing to take a seat in the curricle and to talk on affairs in the Baltic or other less important matters, he had no idea of discussing his errand to Delaford with anyone.

"I must write a letter and pack my bag, and will then be at your service," he said, "if, as I understand, you wish to start this evening. Otherwise I will see if I can hire a chaise."

"You are in a hurry! However, I am willing to start in an hour's time if it pleases you. There is moonlight, and we shall be well on our way before dark. We can sleep at Honiton and reach Delaford in the morning."'

Richard Pennington returned to the farm, wrote a short note to Mrs. Dashwood, and was gone before the farm-lad, to whom he gave it for delivery, had put it into Thomas's hand at the door of Barton Cottage.

Mrs. Dashwood and Edward returned from their walk, chatting of trivial matters. They were met by Elinor with so disturbed and anxious a countenance that her mother took instant alarm.

"Have you bad news? Has a post come while we were away, or a messenger?"

Elinor reassured her. Nothing untoward had happened. There had been a visitor, and she had been uncertain how to act, but hoped she had done right.

"Tell me, Elinor, what is it ? I insist on knowing the worst."

"Pray, mamma, do not be disturbed. The visitor was Commander Pennington. He asked for you, and I told him you were not within, and he asked for Margaret, and I fear I did wrong but I told him where Margaret is."

“I do not see why that should be wrong,” said Mrs. Dashwood. "I suppose he will come and see me again. Did he say where he was staying? He did not expect to be in England again so soon, when he left us last April.”

She spoke in a light, cheerful tone. She had always considered that Elinor thought too much both of Richard Pennington’s admiration of Margaret and of his possible shortcomings. Elinor’s kindness and goodness of heart must always be valued, but her mother did sometimes wish she would be less serious.

“Who is this Commander Pennington?” asked Edward. “Is it that admirer of Margaret’s? By the way, I wonder if by any chance he is Richard Pennington. If so, I knew him some six or seven years ago, long before I became a country parson. He spent some of his leave with a friend of mine, an excellent fellow, I wish I had seen him.”

Poor Elinor! Her discretion had been too great, and she regretted it as she had never expected to regret the exercise of her favourite virtue. Her mother appeared to think her discretion as unimportant as anything else in the matter. The subject was swept aside, and Edward was led to give an entertaining account of Mrs. Ferrars at Delaford Parsonage, and the various grounds of complaint over Elinor’s arrangements, which amused both ladies excessively. Elinor, secure in Edward’s satisfaction, cared for no other criticism, and Mrs. Dashwood shed tears of laughter at the account Edward gave of Mrs. Ferrars’s servants compelled to associate with the parsonage maids, who knew nothing of London ways.

Edward’s bag must now be unpacked, and Elinor went with him to see him do it, and arrange his handkerchiefs and brushes as he liked. They had not been together for some weeks, and it was natural that some half-hour should be occupied in what need not have taken many minutes. While they were absent a note was handed to Mrs. Dashwood, which she read with astonishment:

DEAR MADAM,

I called this evening in the hope of seeing your daughter, Margaret. If I had been so fortunate as to find you at home I should have told you of my

errand, which was to ask your daughter to become my wife, I hear that she is starting for Scotland almost immediately. There is therefore no time to be lost if I am to see her before she goes. When this is in your hands I shall be on my way to Delaford.

Believe me, dear madam,

Yours obediently,

RICHARD PENNINGTON,

Mrs. Dashwood read and reread the letter. She had to decide at once. Should she, or should she not, speak of it to Elinor? She decided that she would not do so; shut it in her desk, and stood by the window looking out at the rising moon. She would not answer the letter. He did not ask for her consent—it was not her consent that he wanted—but as she remained there looking out into the garden, and thinking of her Margaret at Delaford, she gave him her consent, and wished him well with all her heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MRS. FERRARS, as Marianne expected, repeated her request that the sisters should accompany her to Scotland. She was none the less surprised at having her offer accepted.

The contest between the elder and the younger lady was still carried on, but the ground of difference was changed. It was not now whether Marianne should or should not join her husband in Scotland, but whether she was doing so to please herself or out of kindness to Mrs. Ferrars, who always assumed the one reason and Marianne the other.

It was Wednesday morning. Edward had left on Tuesday, was giving his horses two days' rest, and would return on Friday, bringing Elinor back to take charge of the children and soothe her disturbed household. Mrs. Ferrars, Marianne and Margaret were to start early on Friday, with man and maid in the chaise behind, and intended to reach Bath in time for the Sunday. The journey was to be continued at a similarly leisurely pace and Margaret looked forward with great interest to the coming week.

This morning Marianne found it necessary to go to the village to give some orders, and had added that she proposed to look in on Mrs. Ferrars to give her something vexatious to think about. As soon as she was gone, Margaret took some work and went to sit in an old yew arbour which stood on a mound against the high wall that surrounded the garden. Thence she could see Marianne walking along the lane towards the village, the morning coach passing on the turnpike road, then a cart, and later a gentleman's carriage.

It was a cheerful place in which to spend an hour or two in the open air without the fatigue of walking or the necessity for change of dress. She had been settled there for about half an hour when she noticed a curricle coming along the road at a rapid pace. It stopped, and a man got out, and spoke to his companion, who then drove forward more slowly. Margaret had nothing very particular to do, and at first she watched this figure with

idle interest, but it was not long before she became aware that he had turned into the lane, not long before she knew who it was, and not long before he was standing below her on the other side of the wall, and looking up.

"May I come up there, Margaret?" he asked.

"Yes, if you can," she replied, but there is a way round by the great gate."

The gallant Commander was not the man to go round by any great gate when a more direct way was before him. The wall was of rough stone, and some of the stones projected. He was soon near the top, but then experienced some difficulty.

"Shall I give you a hand?" she asked.

"Yes, if you will," said he.

He did not, however, give up the hand when he was beside her in the gazebo. They sat down together, and though Margaret might ask questions about the journey it was difficult to keep up a purely formal conversation when he held her hand. So it was not long before she was silent, and he began to speak, and told her of his errand. It was to ask her a simple question, and, when she heard the question, she was in no doubt as to the answer.

When Marianne returned from her latest discussion with Mrs. Ferrars she heard that which put all quarrels out of her head. It was a joyful day for Marianne. She was not the less in love with romance because she was also in love with the Colonel, and by the time she had heard all they would tell her she was, outwardly at least, by far the most enthusiastic of the three. They quitted her soon to indulge in the endless discussions, the long silences, the renewed converse, which are so familiar to all who have been in love. Marianne was left to the enjoyment of her own thoughts and the formation of further plans.

It was not until dinner was over and Marianne had exercised her right as hostess to secure their company in the drawing-room that she produced her scheme.

"Richard," she asked, "how soon do you wish to be married ? "

“As soon as is possible,” he replied promptly.

“I will not ask Margaret. She would only give me some evasive reply, but I will ask her another question. Do you want to have every one at Barton asking you questions and then inventing the answers and saying you said this or that, and noticing when you blush, and teasing you and vexing you in every imaginable way?”

“I do not think I mind very much. I am used to that sort of thing, and now ____”

“That is the wrong answer, Margaret,” said Richard. “ You should have replied as I did, in the way your sister expected. You should have said simply ‘No.’”

‘‘Her answer was perfectly satisfactory to me, thank you, Richard. She ended it with ‘and now.’ That means, does it not, Margaret, that being to marry Richard makes everything right. Correct me if I am wrong. I do not wish to attribute to you anything you do not willingly admit.”

Margaret willingly admitted as she was asked, and Marianne expressed herself satisfied.

“Richard wishes to get married as soon as possible, and Margaret admits that nothing else matters. Now for my third question, which is for both of you. Do you wish to please me greatly?”

This was immediately agreed to by both.

“Well, then, do, do come to Scotland with us, Richard, and be married there. It is the most entrancing scheme. I have been thinking of it half the morning. Margaret and I will travel with Mrs. Ferrars, and you will follow in a hired chaise. At all the stops there you will be, and I will present you to Mrs. Ferrars as a mere acquaintance. We shall spend Sunday in Bath, and I will take care that she is kept out of the way, but she is bound to see you, and to find out that you are following us, and she will be so delightfully angry at your continued appearances, and abuse you so much, and I shall enjoy myself beyond measure.”

Margaret protested that their marriage was being pressed into service to keep up the contest with Mrs. Ferrars, but Marianne would not have it so.

She had other and better reasons to urge.

"Do think how deplorably unromantic our marriages have been. Mamma, to begin with, marrying Papa, years and years older than herself, and a widower of all things. Then Elinor, with dear good Edward, who is the most prosaic creature in the world, and as to myself, though I would not have anything different, no one can possibly think my marriage in the least romantic. Now you two have the most amazing opportunity. Nothing could exceed the delightful romance of your situation. To make it perfect you must elope."

" Mamma," began Margaret.

"Mamma will be delighted,'' went on Marianne. "She said at my wedding that she hoped she would never have to undergo so much of fuss and ceremony again. She even said she hoped you would elope when your turn came, though I do not suppose she quite meant that. However, there can be no harm in taking her at her word."

"That is not what I meant," said Margaret. "I did not think she would particularly desire wedding festivities, but I think she should know what is happening, that her consent——"

"I wrote to her before I came away," said Richard.

This was unexpected.

"Do you mean she knows?" asked Margaret.

"She knows what I wanted."

"And she did not object? She consented," declared Marianne. "There can be no question of it. If she had wished to prevent it she would have done so."

"She did not have very much time," said Richard.

"Oh, Mamma always says if she does not wish anything. Besides, she would never oppose us in anything that was of real importance. I am sure Mamma would be on my side. She would love to vex Mrs. Ferrars."

"There is one thing I do not like," said Richard. "How about the Colonel? This is his house. I do not want to elope from it without his consent."

"Oh!" said Marianne. ''That is another point. You would never, never

guess it to look at him, but my husband was once all ready prepared to elope himself, only all was discovered."

"With you ?" asked Richard, puzzled.

"No, not with me, with another lady, long, long ago. It is a great secret; but it will be impossible for him to make any objection to elopements from his house. Also, I really do not see what else is to be done. You would not wish Margaret to go to Scotland, and leave you here?"

Richard agreed that he would not.

"Of course she could stay on at the parsonage with Elinor."

Margaret thought not.

"Well, then, there is nothing for it but for you to come to Scotland with us, and when there it would be a pity not to get married. For if you do you can go straight back together to Mamma, and you will see at once if you have vexed her. But I think it will amuse and please her of all things."

It did really seem to be a plan of some convenience. Marianne assumed it to be settled. Richard found it very much to his liking, and Margaret only stipulated that they should write without delay to her mother.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE elopement took place, with the unconscious Mrs. Ferrars and the deeply interested Mrs. Brandon as chaperones. It was, of course, a very romantic affair.

The journey through England was as delightful as such a journey must be. It was leisurely, and if Mrs. Dashwood had wished to stop them she could very easily have done so. Thirty-six hours were spent in Bath, and at each stopping-place they arrived in time for dinner and did not proceed till the next day. Commander Pennington had no idea of keeping out of sight, and Mrs. Ferrars's anger steadily grew, while her curiosity was not aroused. When they reached the Border the wedding ceremony was short and to the point. Marianne returned to the carriage without her sister, and stated that she would not accompany them farther as she was now married. The effect of this news on Mrs, Ferrars was all that Marianne had desired. It was even greater than she had expected, and she was not at all sorry to part from her when they came to the meeting-place at which Colonel Brandon had been charged to appear.

He was there, somewhat bewildered at his wife's unlooked-for decision to follow him, and not less so when he heard a part of the romantic adventure which had just been achieved.

If Marianne supposed that an elopement would give people less to talk about than an ordinary wedding she was mistaken, but if, after hearing what Colonel Brandon had to say to her, she was afraid that she had hurried her young sister into an imprudent marriage, she was again mistaken, for the marriage proved a very happy one. It was founded, not on long friendship, careful choice, the wishes of true friends, similarity of tastes or equality of fortune, not in fact on any of those circumstances which bring about successful unions, but on that which happens to some few fortunate mortals and is called "Love at first sight."

Mrs. Dashwood was easily placated. She had never been very angry,

though she would have counselled delay if she had been given the opportunity to offer advice. Nothing was left for her to do but to be kind and welcoming, and nothing was so easy. Richard Pennington was soon as well-beloved as her other sons-in-law, and not far behind them in the affection he returned.

The life of a naval officer's wife, though not so full of hardships as Mrs. Palmer had predicted, was not easy. It was long before Commander Pennington attained post-rank. He was employed on a guardship off Malta for some years, and Margaret had her wish of travelling, but not in circumstances of great wealth.

When William IV came to the throne he took care of the navy, and a great many officers who had fancied themselves forgotten got a pleasant surprise. Richard was among them, and became Captain Pennington. He got no further promotion, but was contented with this step in rank. They had but one son, and their income was sufficient for their needs.

If Margaret had less of some things than her sisters she had more of others. Marianne was right in saying that Margaret's marriage was romantic for she had that kind of happiness which is not deserved because no one can deserve it, and Richard Pennington shared that happiness because he made it.

But happiness should result from well-doing. It must be as distressing to the reader as it is to the writer to notice that if Commander Pennington's manners had been better he would have allowed Margaret to go home without attempting to make her acquaintance on High-church down; and if she had had more discretion she would have withdrawn after a proper acknowledgment of his politeness, returned home, and no doubt become Lady Carey in due course. She might have been almost as happy in that case, and would certainly have been richer and more comfortable, but there is no doubt that Richard's happiness resulted from his lapse in manners, and Margaret's inattention to decorum.

THE END